

Think About Kink: How Worldview Affects Sexual Practices

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**

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Abstract

This study investigated how mass media can affect sexual practices by looking at BDSM participation pre- and post-2012 when *Fifty Shades of Grey* was released. It also investigated the level of conservatism between BDSM participants and non-participants, as well as in-group conservatism differences for the BDSM sample. A sample of 161 individuals were analysed using an amended Social and Economic Conservatism Scale (SECS), with results showing that almost 30% of the sample with BDSM experience introduced BDSM since 2012, with females introducing it considerably more often since 2012. Results also showed that pre-2012 BDSM participants were significantly less conservative than post-2012 BDSM participants, but that there is no significant difference in conservatism between BDSM participants and non-BDSM participants. Results verify that the mass media influences sexual practices and that *Fifty Shades of Grey* attracted a newer more conservative group to the BDSM community. Implications involve the powerful role of mass media in changing social norms.

Introduction

With the release of E.L. James' *50 Shades of Grey* in 2012, the topic of BDSM was pulled from the shade into the light of public scrutiny, and with it, a renewed interest in its participants. The timing was appropriate, as those for whom BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadism & masochism) was a lifestyle had recently been declassified by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) fifth edition as suffering paraphilic disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). This change had come about after three decades of campaigning, with the result that BDSM practitioners were no longer classed as mentally ill based solely on their participation in BDSM. Prior to the DSM-5, BDSM practice could be used as an argument against an individual in family law cases (Gerson, 2015) owing to its designation as a mental illness.

The psychological establishment had made the adjustment and the general public soon followed with *50 Shades of Grey* selling 125 million copies as of 2015 (Stedman, 2015) and spawning a later movie adaptation in 2015 which grossed over \$571 million. It also brought BDSM practices from their status as an underground subculture to being discussed openly and at length in the mass media (The Ellen Show, 2012; ABC News, 2012). It is noteworthy that four years before the widespread popularity of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Hébert & Weaver (2008) noted that "although personality and sexuality are beginning to be explored in the literature generally, the connection between personality characteristics and BDSM proclivities has received minimal attention" - the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey* would result in several more studies into human sexuality and in particular, BDSM.

Who are the participants involved in BDSM?

Although BDSM practices were classed as paraphilias in the DSM-5 until its revision in 2013, prior research did not corroborate the claim that BDSM practitioners were mentally ill individuals or survivors of sexual abuse. Instead, studies show that practitioners are on average psychologically healthier than the general population (Richters, De Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith, 2008), specifically by showing less neuroticism, more extroversion and more openness to new experiences (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013) while also displaying higher levels of narcissism and histrionic traits which Connolly (2006) notes could be the result of high social desirability and citing them as personality strengths in their own right. Williams' (2006) research the same year summarised that individuals who practised BDSM were "well educated, well-adjusted" while Sandnabba, Santtila, & Nordling (1999) found that 38% of their BDSM sample were university-educated compared to just 6% of the general population. In a statement that would ring true over the next 25 years of research into the subject, Baumeister (1991) noted that "probably the most important point is that sexual masochism appears to be more common among successful, individualistic people" (p. 120). Within the BDSM community however, personality differences can arise between participants: Hébert & Weaver (2008) found that dominants scored differently from submissives on measures such as desire for control and extroversion while a study by Damon (2002) showed that dominants had higher levels of self-esteem than submissives, who were significantly lower.

Another dividing group in the BDSM community is that of gender; higher numbers of men participate than women (Richters et al., 2008; Janus & Janus, 1993) with women primarily gravitating toward or fantasising about partaking in a sexually submissive role (Connolly, 2006). Renaud & Byers (1999) corroborated this while also adding that men

tended to report "both more frequent and more diverse positive and negative sexual cognitions than did women." However, Guerra, Gouveia, Sousa, Lima, & Freires (2012) found in their study that gender plays no role in sexual attitudes, a claim that directly contradicts that made by both Connolly and Renaud & Byers. However, the samples from Guerra et al's study was from Brazil while Connolly's was from California and Renaud & Byers' was from Canada; a possible explanation for the differing results could be that the geographical disparity also included social and cultural differences, such as the closer similarity between a US sample and a Canadian sample compared to a Brazilian sample group. It should be noted that a study into Brazilian attitudes toward sex was conducted in 2013 and did find a gender disparity (Heilborn & Cabral, 2013) so the Guerra et al. study remains an anomaly.

One point worth exploring is the level of participation in BDSM practices which varies across many studies – it can be anywhere from 1.3% of women and 2.2% of men (Richters et al., 2008) to as high as 11% of women and 14% of men (Janus & Janus, 1993). There is consistency in higher numbers of LGBT participants than heterosexual participants (Richters et al., 2008; Hébert & Weaver, 2008; Connolly, 2006), but it is worth noting that BDSM participants tend to be more open to sexual exploration (or a general openness to experience as noted previously) including same-sex or bisexual experience (Richters et al., 2008; Elliot, 1997; Lenius, 2011).

Does sexually-driven media have an effect?

With the aforementioned 125 million copies of *Fifty Shades of Grey* sold, this would suggest that the topic of BDSM within the book stirred something latent in the public consciousness, particularly among the female population; indeed, 80% of the book sales were attributed to women (Dempsey, 2012) and its availability as an e-book was notable, with six times more electronic copies sold than print copies (Acuna, 2013). This allowed females to read an erotic novel in private, an act which according to some researchers could be considered outside the normal scope of society (Bosman, 2012; Bennett-Smith, 2012). One reason for the social condemnation of women reading erotica is that they may develop unrealistic expectations about their lives by reading fiction (Rodale, 2015) including expectations of their romantic partners. However, the romantic fiction / erotic novel genre in 2012 was immensely popular that year to the detriment of other genres ('Erotica boom affects genre book sales', 2012) and led to a study carried out by Reese-Weber & McBride in 2015. Their study showed that females who read *Fifty Shades of Grey* reported higher sexual desire levels than those who had not read the book. Part of the reason for this was attributed to high character identification, and conversely, lower character identification led to lessened sexual desires. The publication of the novel led to real-world sales of sex toys increasing ('50 Shades' spikes sex toy sales - CNN Video, 2012) and another study into romance novels showed that 85% of respondents either felt the same about their sex partner or felt more positive, while 75.5% reported that the novels had had an impact on their sex life (Anderton, 2009). A relevant point is that romantic novels such as *Fifty Shades of Grey* may assist couples with improving their sex lives through providing ideas or heightening arousal levels as previously mentioned. The popularity of the romance genre matches up with a survey claiming that up to 54% of people are dissatisfied with their sex lives (Harris Interactive,

2012) while 28% have the desire to try something new while lacking the confidence to pursue these new experiences (Zaw, 2015).

Is BDSM a liberal pastime?

As an interest that society has generally frowned upon (Richters et al., 2008), such as through the pre DSM-5's classification of it as a paraphilia such as DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), it could be argued that BDSM was more of a liberal pursuit owing to its placement outside the socially accepted sexual practices (Williams, 2006), but no definitive evidence of BDSM participants being liberal or conservative has yet been forthcoming.

The question of a liberal or conservative approach to politics, economics or society and its link to sexuality has been explored to some degree; studies have found that house prices in liberal neighbourhoods increase after same-sex couples move into the area, while conservative neighbourhoods experience a fall in house prices following an increase in same-sex residents, demonstrating that beliefs toward sexuality can have economic repercussions (Christafore & Leguizamon, 2012). This negative reaction of politically and/or morally conservative individuals to homosexual or non-normative sexual activity was expanded upon by Feinberg, Antonenko, Willer, Horberg, & John (2014) as they found that their conservative sample reacted with a stronger sense of disgust to homosexual or non-normative sexual activity than did their liberal sample. Conservatives also display lower sexual knowledge and less use of contraception than liberals, with religious values cited as being of more relevance to conservatives than liberals (Haverstock, 1984). However, this claim by Haverstock (1984) could be challenged by a study carried out almost 20 years later

where riskier sexual activity was reported by those who scored highly on "openness to change, hedonism and self-enhancement" (Goodwin et al., 2002). Although the measure used (Schwartz's Portrait Values Questionnaire) does not result in an individual being given conservative or liberal rating (Schwartz, 1992), it does raise the question of where an individual who scores highly on openness to change, hedonism and self-enhancement would lie on a liberal-conservative scale and how it would interact with Haverstock's previous results. Another question raised by the Goodwin study is whether individuals who are more open to change and hedonism would also be more open to BDSM experimentation or experience as numerous studies have shown that BDSM participants are more open to bisexual experimentation, or experimentation outside their usual sexual orientation (Richters et al., 2008).

The rise to popularity of *Fifty Shades of Grey* was notable for many reasons, but among them was how it was classed as empowering for women (Loose Women, 2015; Trout, 2015; Williams, 2015) while at the same time featuring a female lead character who was utterly submissive to the male lead character. At a time where female athletes are not only allowed to participate in male-dominated sports, but are now given equal billing (Wertheim, 2015), and when traditionally male-fronted movie franchises such as *Ghostbusters* are rebooted with females cast in the starring roles (Child, 2015) - the resulting display of female sexual empowerment in this social zeitgeist is the female's ability to take control of her sexual life by appearing to let go of all power and autonomy and assuming a submissive role. This juxtaposition raises the question pertaining to the broader debate about whether sexual behaviour is learned or innate; as noted, previous studies have shown that most men are dominant while most females are submissive in a BDSM environment and so the question remains whether nature or nurture are responsible for the role chosen by an individual or if it

is a combination of both. In the meantime, Seltzer (2012) suggests that females actually do take control of the relationship power dynamic; they do this by embracing the erotic adoration of the male and by being a submissive object of desire for him. Once the male is enraptured, the female then has control over the relationship through employing submissiveness to charm and disarm the man as her needs dictate. Another study using dogs demonstrates that dominant and submissive roles can and should be switched up regularly in order for the animal (in this case, a dog) to have a whole experience (Ogas & Gaddam, 2012). It also alludes to pornographic websites based around the topic of male submission with their being hugely popular among men despite most men being dominant; this desire to experience something outside the usual script is claimed to be innate, if human behaviour can be modelled on animal behaviour. One interesting note from Seltzer (2012) on the subject of changing sexual scripts is that "there can be submission within dominance—and dominance within submission," as support for the role-switch experience. Although another non-human study, Wallen (1996) found that the sexual development of rhesus monkeys was heavily influenced by the presence or absence of the mother; this application of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1958) results in a variance in either aggression and dominance in males, or submissiveness in females. However, Wismeijer & van Assen (2013) included attachment styles in their study and did not find any major anomalies nor significantly negative attachment styles among their BDSM sample. Although *Fifty Shades of Grey* also brought the previously marginalised and ostracised BDSM community to public recognition and has arguably increased acceptance; as Williams (2006) noted, "it should be remembered that 'deviant' means different from a norm—not necessarily dysfunctional." Connolly (2006) noted that only 0.8% of the BDSM sample were frequently distressed at the thought of being 'outed', while almost 87% felt they could be 'out' to at least some other adults without

fear of ostracisation. These studies were pre-Fifty Shades of Grey, but have since been promisingly built on by Sprott & Berkey (2015) who noted that today, there are many BDSM organisations for members to join and partake in the community of, including some on university and college campuses.

Sexual scripting is another area of relevance due to its application to BDSM; traditionally, BDSM was a niche subculture with participation figures that never reached close to majority figures. However, media usage can impact on sexual cognitions which in turn influence sexual behaviour, and in this case it proved most effective through both movies and print magazines (Ward, Epstein, Caruthers, & Merriwether, 2011). Books were not tested, but the prevalence of print and visual media are reminiscent of Fifty Shades of Grey in both book and movie format. However, one facet of sexual scripting that has already undergone a change is the newcomers to the BDSM community; Studies have shown that violations in the BDSM culture (which universally promotes the 'Safe, Sane, Consensual code) tend to come from newcomers (The National Coalition for Sexual Freedom 2013, as cited by Sprott, 2015) and as Sprott noted, this influx has already affected the 'old guard' of the existing BDSM community. With Fifty Shades of Grey being a romantic novel, its scripting and characterisation could be contrasted with prize-winning romantic novels, as a study looked at such a set of novels and noted differences and similarities. Although Fifty Shades of Grey was not one of the novels studied, Dana Ménard & Cabrera's study (2011) described how the typical romance novel features two Caucasian able-bodied young people, a male and a female in their early thirties who are childless and very attractive. However, Fifty Shades did deviate slightly due to its overt description of 'kinky' sex which is not a common trait in romantic novels pre-2011.

Hypothesis 1 predicts that there will be an increase in the number of BDSM

participants since 2012; in this case, whether the rise in popularity of Fifty Shades of Grey in 2012 resulted in an increase of individuals experimenting with BDSM practices. Hypothesis 2 predicts that BDSM participants are less conservative in terms of social and economical views than those who do not have BDSM experience; much has been learned in the last 15 years about BDSM participants, but their place on the liberal/conservatism spectrum is yet unknown and should provide a greater understanding of the personalities and worldviews of those who participate. Finally, Hypothesis 3 predicts that BDSM participants who were active pre-2012 are less conservative in terms of social and economic views than those who introduced BDSM post-2012. In addition to these hypotheses, the study itself will also contribute to the already existing literature on the level of BDSM participation among a general population group, the age groups and gender breakdowns for those who participate, and finally whether there was a difference between gender or age groups in the pre- and post-2012 groups.

Method

Participants

The sample was comprised of 180 responses; however, 19 participants were excluded from final analysis due to either incomplete or erroneous data. Of the 161 participants remaining, 82 were female, 75 were male, one demi girl, one trans man, one cis male and one cis female. Participants were aged from 18 years old, with almost 84% of the sample in the 25-44 age range. Of the 161 participants, 108 stated that they had been involved with BDSM practices, while 53 stated they had no BDSM experience. Within those who had BDSM experience, 76 stated the experience had happened before 2012, while 32 stated it had happened in or since 2012. The sample was composed using a mixture of snowball sampling and targeted sampling; snowball sampling was conducted using social media, while the targeted sampling requested that BDSM-related social media accounts post the link to the survey. A sample was planned from within a BDSM community but due to the private nature of these communities it was not possible at this time.

Design

The study had a mixed factorial, quantitative design. For the correlational analysis, the predictor variables were economic and social conservatism, while the criterion variable was BDSM participation. The within-group for BDSM participants variable was again economic and social conservatism. The mixed factorial design allowed the study to determine whether economic and social conservatism influenced participation in BDSM.

Materials

The questionnaire used was the 12 Item Social and Economic Conservatism Scale (SECS) devised by Everett (2013). Designed to capture the conservatism of an individual using a modern approach, the SECS incorporates both economic and social sub-scales. It is comprised of 12 items, with the unaltered version containing 7 social items and five economic items; examples of social items would be abortion or religion, while economic items included limited government or business. Participants are asked to respond to each item describing how positive or negative they feel toward it on a scale of 0-100; scores of 0 (zero) indicate greater negativity, while scores of 100 indicate greater positivity. Reliability scores are positive for the scale "with a good overall Cronbach's alpha of .88 for the complete 12-item scale, an alpha of .70 for the 5-item economic conservatism sub-scale, and an alpha of .87 for the 7-item social conservatism sub-scale" (Everett, 2013).

For the purposes of this study, the SECS was amended after consultation owing to the differing cultural requirements – as this study would primarily use Irish people, the item 'gun ownership' was deemed less relevant to non-US samples and was therefore changed to 'immigration'. Immigration was chosen due to it being one of two choices excluded by Everett when he was finalising the SECS and also because it is more relevant to the sample. Also, instead of the word 'patriotism', 'nationalism' was instead used owing to it's more common usage in Ireland. Finally, a 0-10 scoring system was used instead of 0-100 to assist ease of use for participants.

Before the SECS, the survey asked the age range of participants, and also their gender; the question on gender was left open-ended as it allowed participants to self-identify their place on the gender spectrum. Two additional questions were added to this questionnaire after the SECS: the first asked participants if they had experience of BDSM

practices – these practices were chosen after consulting the existing literature (Williams, 2006; Richters, De Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith, 2008; Hébert & Weaver, 2014; Connolly, 2006) to find out commonly used terms, but also to impart upon participants that acts such as spanking or role play are considered BDSM, not just specialist interests such as cock and ball torture, mummification or fire play (Connolly, 2006). The second question was presented to those who have BDSM experience and asked them if this experience occurred pre-2012 or or 2012 and since – the purpose of this question was to correlate whether the 2012 swell of publicity for Fifty Shades of Grey influenced the sexual practices of the general public and led to more people trying BDSM practices.

Procedure

Upon clicking on the survey link, participants were presented with an introduction screen explaining that the survey was examining how worldview can affect sexual practices. They were also informed that contact information for support services would be included on the final page – these services included the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre and Samaritans among others. Participants were also informed of the anonymity of their information and the inability to withdraw after submission due to the data being anonymous. They were also informed that participation was completely voluntary and they were not obliged to take part, but that by completing the survey they were consenting to participate in the study. The survey itself asked participants their age range, before asking them for their gender; this question was left open-ended in order to encourage an inclusive approach to gender and gender identity. The Social and Economic Conservatism Scale was measured after this using the following 12 items: Abortion, Limited Government, Military & National Security,

Religion, Welfare Benefits, Immigration, Traditional Marriage, Traditional Values, Fiscal Responsibility, Business, The Family Unit and Nationalism. The penultimate question asked if the participant had ever been involved with any elements of BDSM, and if this was answered with a 'Yes', the final question asked if this activity had occurred before or since 2012. The participant was then thanked for taking part, and presented with the support services information.

Ethics

This study was provided with ethical approval by the Ethics Board of Dublin Business School, and was run in adherence with the Psychological Society of Ireland Code of Ethics. Informed consent was sought and obtained by all participants and support service information was made available, as was contact information. Full confidentiality was assured to all participants.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The data obtained from the questionnaire was analysed using SPSS 22 software.

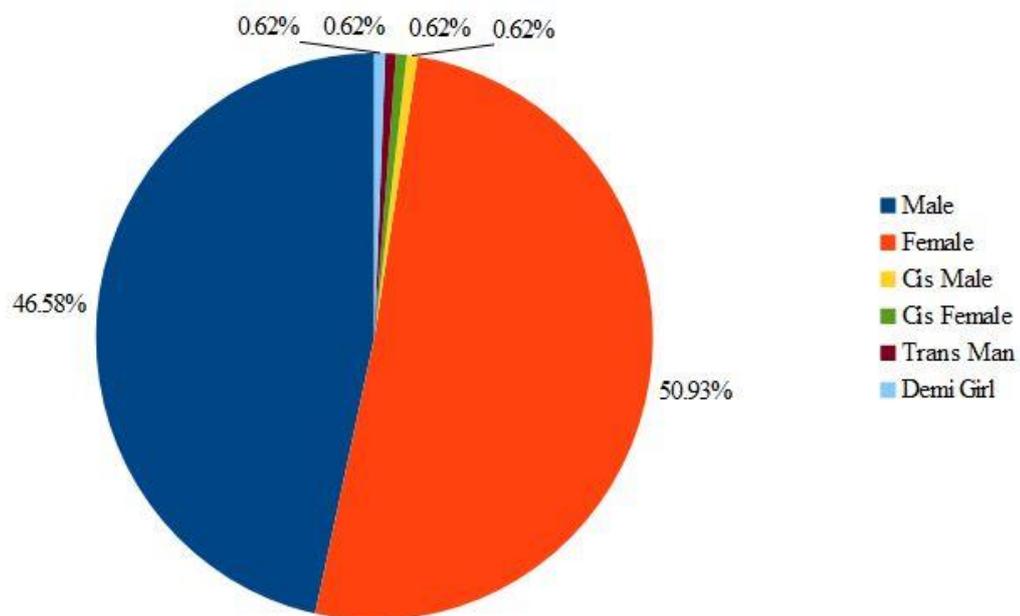


Fig. 1: Pie chart showing gender breakdown for sample

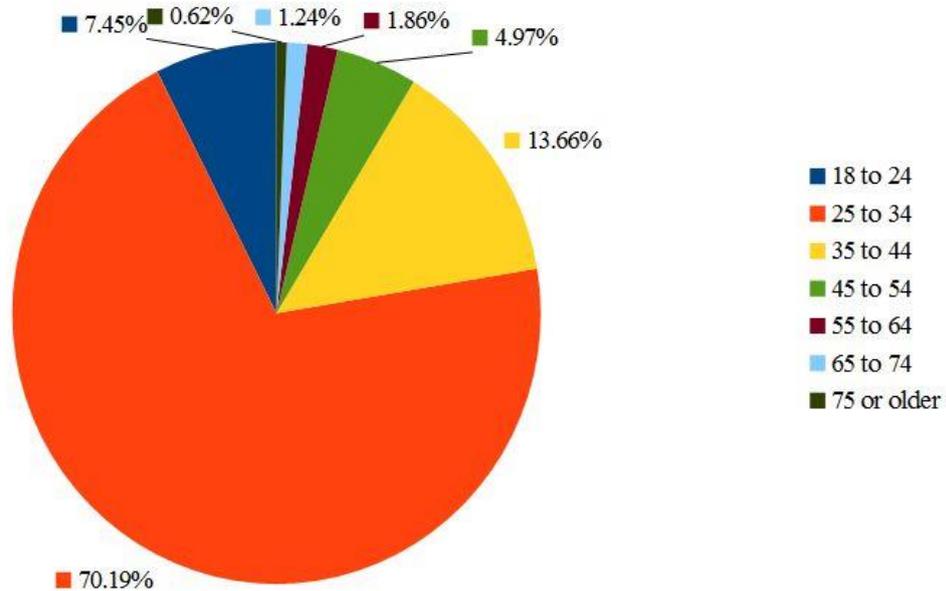


Fig. 2: Pie chart showing age breakdown for sample

Analysis of the data revealed that of the 161 participant sample, eighty two (50.93%) were female while seventy five (46.58%) were male. There was one cis male, one cis female, one trans man and one demi girl each of whom made up 0.62% of the sample, shown in Figure 1. Figure 2 shows that of this sample, twelve (7.45%) were in the 18 to 24 age range, which was followed by the largest group of one hundred and thirteen individuals aged 25 to 34, making up 70.19% of the entire sample. There were 22 individuals (13.66%) in the 35 to 44 group, with the 45 to 54 group of eight individuals comprising 4.97% of the sample. The 55 to 64 sample had three individuals (1.86%), with the 65 to 74 sample having 2 individuals (1.24%) and finally the 75 and Older sample containing one individual who made up the remaining 0.62% of the overall sample.

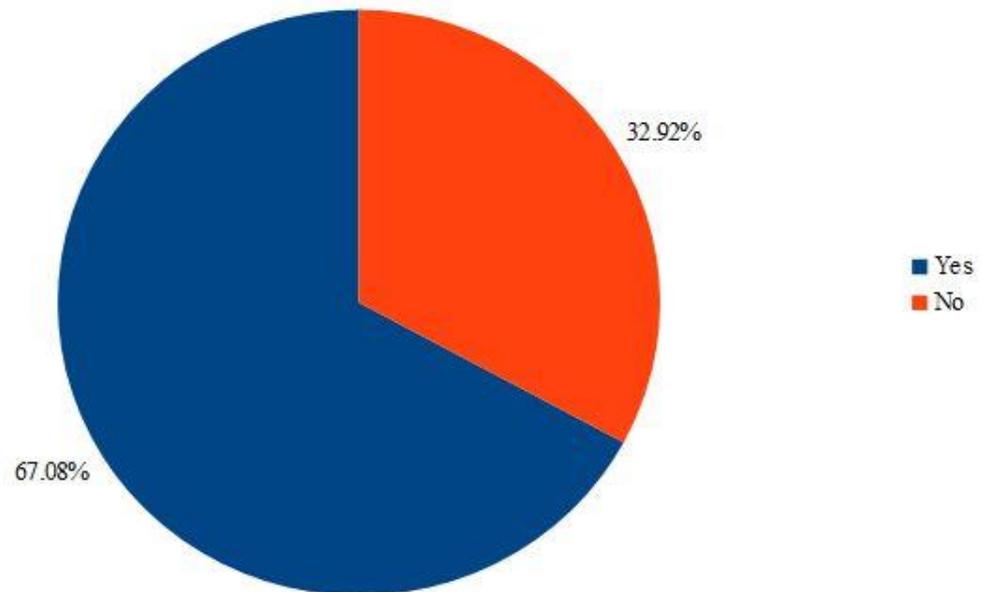


Fig.3: Pie chart showing whether participants have BDSM Experience

Inferential Statistics

The groups were split into those who had BDSM experience and those who did not. Conservatism was measured using the 12 Item Social and Economic Conservatism Scale for both groups which revealed the following:

Table 1: An Independent Samples T-Test Table displaying the differences between the 'BDSM Experience' group and the 'No BDSM Experience' group for the Social, Economic and combined SECS variables.

Variables	Groups	Mean	SD	t	df	p
SECS Mean	BDSM Experience	4.95	1.35	-.600	159	.549
	No BDSM Experience	5.08	1.04			
Social Mean	BDSM Experience	4.59	1.52	-.776	159	.439
	No BDSM Experience	4.78	1.46			
Economic Mean	BDSM Experience	5.67	1.63	.049	159	.961
	No BDSM Experience					
	Experience	5.66	1.15			

The BDSM Experience group showed lower scores than the No BDSM Experience group for both the overall SECS Mean and Social Mean, while their Standard Deviation across all three Variables was higher showing greater range of scoring. Standard deviation was especially strong in the Economic Mean variable for the BDSM Experience group. However, the No BDSM Experience scored a lower mean on the Economic scale, showing a very slightly less conservative score.

Means Comparison between the BDSM Experience and Non-BDSM Experience

Groups

An Independent Samples T-Test was run to compare the group who had BDSM experience and the group who had no BDSM experience based on their answers to the SECS. As Table 1 shows, there was not a significant difference in any of the scores for those with BDSM Experience (M=4.95, SD=1.35) and those with No BDSM Experience (M=5.08, SD=1.04) conditions; $t(159)=-.600$, $p = .549$.

These results suggest that both groups share a common world-view through their similarity on the SECS – however, the results still demonstrate a very slight difference in the mean especially on the Social Mean This indicates that the BDSM Experience group score lower on the conservative scale than those without BDSM Experience, but not enough to display statistical significance.

Means Comparison between the Post-2012 BDSM Experience and Pre-2012 BDSM

Experience groups

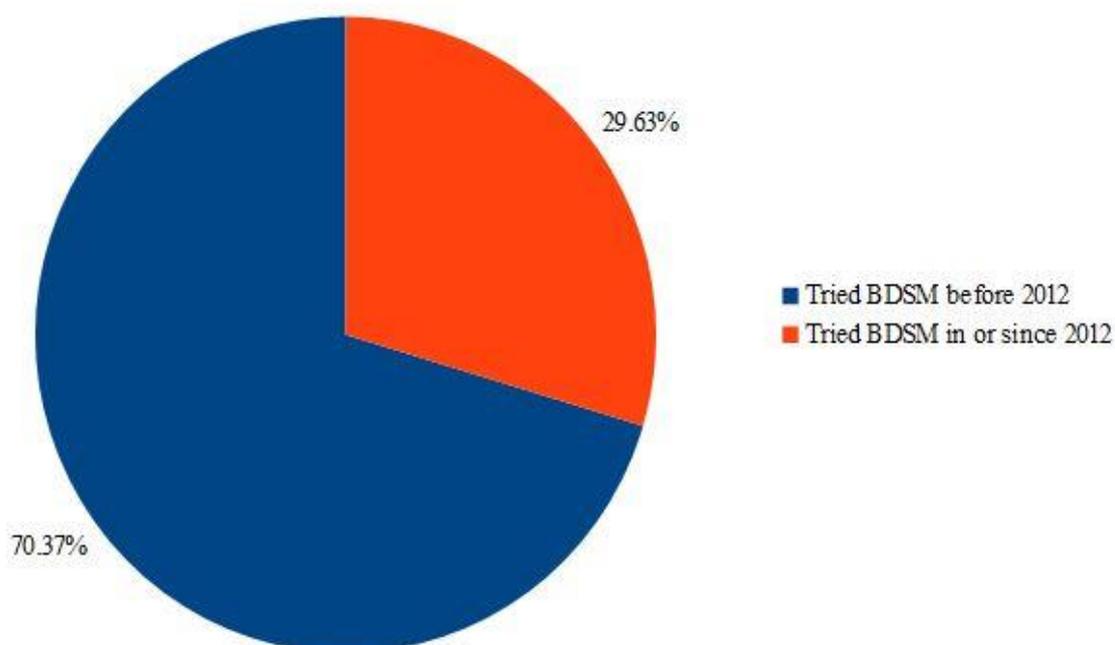


Fig. 4: Pie chart showing how many participants tried BDSM pre- or post-2012

Almost 30% of the overall sample only introduced BDSM into their sex lives after 2012, which suggests that the 2012 publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey* elicited a notable increase in BDSM experimentation and experience among the public. To investigate in-group differences between those with BDSM experience, the BDSM Experience group was then split into two samples; the first answered positively to BDSM experience prior to 2012, and the second sample introduced BDSM during or after 2012. There were 32 participants who only had post-2012 BDSM experience, while there were 76 respondents with pre-2012

BDSM experience. Both of these samples were used to carry out an Independent Samples T-Test which again tested their scores on the SECS.

Table 2: An Independent Samples T-Test Table displaying the differences between the 'Post 2012' group and the 'Pre-2012' group for the Social, Economic and combined SECS variables.

Variables	Groups	Mean	SD	t	df	p
SECS Mean	Post-2012	5.32	1.20	1.877	106	.063
	Pre-2012	4.80	1.39			
Social Mean	Post-2012	5.10	1.36	2.368	106	.020
	Pre-2012	4.37	1.53			
Economic Mean	Post-2012	5.74	1.31	.293	106	.770
	Pre-2012	5.64	1.75			

As Table 2 shows, there was a significant difference in the Social Mean score for those with Post-2012 BDSM Experience (M=5.10, SD=1.36) and those with Pre-2012 BDSM Experience (M=4.37, SD=1.53) conditions; $t(106)=2.368$, $p = .020$. This result suggests a strong difference in the level of social conservatism between those whose BDSM experience came before 2012 and those whose BDSM experience came after 2012. There

was not a significant difference in the SECS Mean between the Post-2012 BDSM Experience (M=5.32, SD=1.20) and those with Pre-2012 BDSM Experience (M=4.80, SD=1.39) conditions; $t(106)=1.877$, $p=.063$, but the score is close enough to statistical significance to warrant noting and later discussion. There was also no significant difference in the Economic Mean between the Post-2012 BDSM Experience (M=5.74, SD=1.31) and those with Pre-2012 BDSM Experience (M=5.64, SD=1.75) conditions; $t(106)=-.293$, $p=.770$.

Breakdown of Age and Gender of Post-2012 BDSM Participants

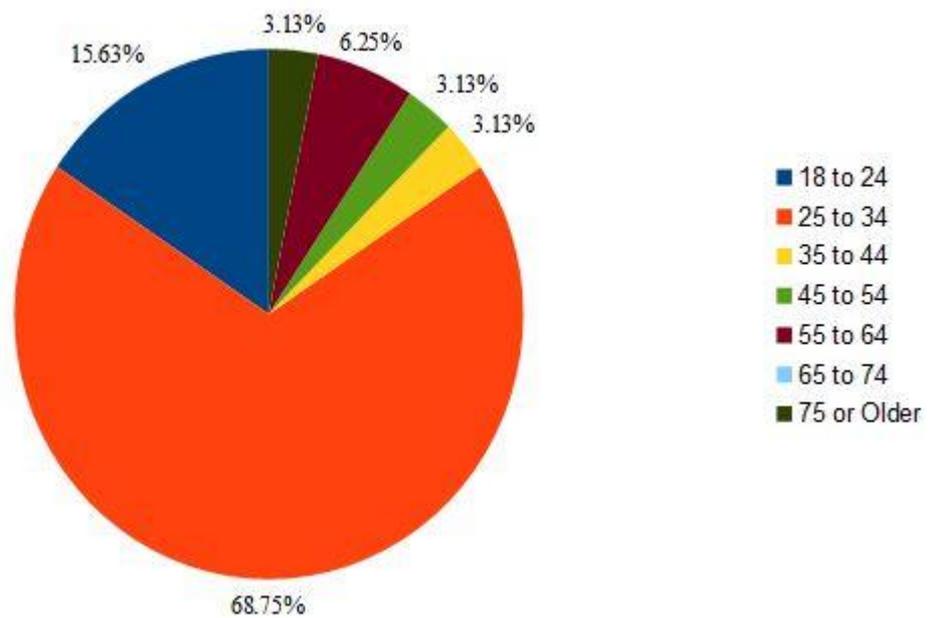


Fig. 5: Pie chart showing age breakdown of post-2012 BDSM Participants

As Figure 4 shows and as previously noted, almost 30% of all BDSM participants introduced BDSM since 2012. Almost 85% of these post-BDSM participants were aged 18 to 34, and when broken down further, 15.6% of those who introduced it since 2012 were aged 18 to 24. This may suggest that younger demographics were influenced to a stronger degree by modern popular culture and media, but there is also the possibility that those in the 18 to 24 age group may not have been sexually active prior to 2012 regardless of media influence, in which case they could not have had pre-2012 BDSM experience. Another notable age group of those who introduced BDSM into their sex lives since 2012 are the 55 to 64 age group, who made up 6.3% of the sample and which was double those in the 35 to 44, 45 to 54 and the 75 and Older age groups.

Gender breakdown showed that among all 108 participants, the split is almost even with female participants making up 51.9% of the sample, and females making up the remaining 48.1% of the sample. The pre-2012 gender breakdown is similar, with the 76 participants showing that 51.3% of males and 48.7% of females having experience of BDSM. However, the post-2012 sample of 32 participants reveals that females make up almost 60% of the sample who only introduced BDSM into their sex lives after 2012. The remaining 40.6% who introduced BDSM after 2012 were male. This suggests that post-2012 BDSM activity was more prominent for females.

Discussion

Aim of Research

Although literature on BDSM participants exists and has been added to considerably in the last ten years, the release of the Fifty Shades of Grey novel and the resulting public attention was a noteworthy event for the BDSM community with regards to public knowledge and increased participation and acceptance which in turn may demonstrate a new type of participant. The present study was carried out with the aim of broadening the knowledge regarding those who participate in BDSM - this included investigating whether the publication of Fifty Shades of Grey in 2012 led to increased numbers of BDSM participation among the general public. The next aim of the study was understanding in-group differences among BDSM participants in terms of social and economic conservatism based on whether they had pre- or post-2012 BDSM experience. Finally, it investigated the differences between participants with BDSM experience and participants with no BDSM experience in terms of Social and Economic Conservatism.

Summary of Findings

Hypothesis 1: There will be an increase in the number of BDSM participants since 2012.

This study found that almost a third of the sample group introduced BDSM since 2012. It also found a considerably higher percentage of females introduced BDSM to their sex lives for the first time after 2012 when compared to the sample who had experience prior to 2012 and the overall sample. These findings suggest that the years since 2012 were more amenable for the general public, especially females, to introduce BDSM into their sex lives (Bosman, 2012; Bennett-Smith, 2012; Sprott, 2015). This would back up the evidence that the audience for *Fifty Shades of Grey* was primarily female (Dempsey, 2012) and also lend weight to the argument that it caused somewhat of a female-driven sexual revolution ('50 Shades' spikes sex toy sales - CNN Video, 2012) owing to its high sales and public awareness ('Erotica boom affects genre book sales', 2012; Stedman & Stedman, 2015). Mass media influence on sexuality has also been noted (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2011) and so an application of the Integrative Model may assist in explaining how the swell of information and acceptance in the mass media toward BDSM resulted in a social shift for the community. Interestingly, when this is combined with the Steinberg & Monahan (2011) study, it suggests that sexual media is not what causes the change, but instead the overall social perception of the issue being discussed. The results of this study suggest strong support for the hypothesis that the publication of *Fifty Shades of Grey* in 2012 had a considerable impact on the number of people introducing BDSM experience to their sex life, and also that females in particular would show an influence.

Hypothesis 2: BDSM participants are less conservative in terms of social and economical views than those who do not have BDSM experience

The study also found that there was a significant difference between the group who had post-2012 BDSM experience and the group who had pre-2012 BDSM experience with regard to their Social Conservatism. Those who had experience pre-2012 were more liberal in their social outlook than those whose BDSM experience was post-2012. The overall combined Social and Economic results did not show a significant difference between groups, but the scores are close enough to be noted as marginally significant and worthy of future research. The groups did not display any significant difference with regards to Economic Conservatism. However, as shown by Poteat & Mereish (2012), group identity and a sense of group belonging is a strong driver for strong and polarising liberal/conservative divides, and this may be considerably more prominent in the US than in Ireland where the majority of the sample was based. In light of these findings, the hypothesis that the Pre-2012 group would display lower levels of conservatism is partially supported.

Hypothesis 3: BDSM participants who were active pre-2012 are less conservative in terms of social and economic views than those who introduced BDSM post-2012

Finally, this study found that there was no significant difference between the BDSM Experience Group and the No BDSM Experience group in terms of either a combined Social and Economic Conservatism score, or either of the Social or Economic Conservatism sub-scores. This result conflicts with previous studies such as Wismeijer & van Assen (2013) who found that BDSM participants show higher levels of openness to new experiences. The result of the present study may be due to the limited sample size, the age demographic not

being representative of all age groups or perhaps the difficulty in recruiting conservative individuals to a survey on sexuality (Bogaert,1996; Morokoff, 1986; Saunders, Fisher, Hewitt & Clayton, 1985, as cited by Bogaert, 2012) . However, the data supports the null hypothesis.

Other findings from the present study add to the existing literature; although Richters et al. (2008), Janus & Janus (1993) and others have given varying BDSM participation levels, few studies show participation levels as high as those shown in this study, with non-participants being in the minority. However, as this study took place in 2016, the impact of the Fifty Shades of Grey book (released in 2012) and movie (released in 2015) cannot be discounted given the publicity that they generated and the renewed interest in BDSM it elicited. With regards to gender research on BDSM, more men than women have historically participated as noted by Richters et al. (2008) and Janus & Janus (1993) but the post-2012 gender findings in the present study show a marked increase in female participation post-2012, which would also conflict with the 1999 study by Renaud & Byers who found that men reported "more frequent and diverse... sexual cognitions" than women.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Present Study

Strengths

The key strength of this study was to begin the understanding of the liberal and conservative scoring of BDSM participants, as this is an unknown element of the BDSM community to date. It provides a starting point of knowledge which allows future research to expand upon the data. Another strength of the present study is its measurement of the impact of mass media on private sexual practices; the publication in 2012 (and later movie release in

2015) of *Fifty Shades of Grey* provided a very strong 'line in the sand' variable with which participation of and interest and influence in BDSM can be researched and understood. The brief length of the study and the ease of completion made it an survey that could be completed easily and quickly with minimum drop off; of the 180 responses, 161 were able to be used for analysis due to providing complete and useful data. The study did benefit from not being too 'heavy' with the data it asked, as the sexuality-related questions only amounted to two and they were simple 'Yes/No' questions. It could be argued that the expansion and explanation of what could be construed as BDSM in Question 5 also allowed the participants a deeper understanding of what is considered BDSM play. The open-ended nature of the 'Gender' question was inclusive and resulted in some interesting and valuable data; the inclusion of individuals who identify as cis male, cis female, demi girl or trans man is one which can be expanded on both in future studies and also as gender diversity becomes more widespread and acceptable.

Weaknesses

One key area of this study which would benefit from development is additional information about the sample; items such as geographical location, education level, job level (unskilled, skilled, executive, manager, etc), income range, relationship status and preferred BDSM activities would have made worthwhile additions. The question of gender, while inclusive, was vague and resulted in some confusion and data which was not usable, such as sexual orientation. Specifying a question for gender and a question for sexual orientation separately would be recommended for future research. Geographical location would allow for cultural or social differences to be taken into consideration when conducting data analysis, while items such as education level, job level and income range would allow

an understanding of the social aspect of participants. This could allow correlation with age or how they score on the liberal/conservative scale. Researchers such as Williams (2006), Sandnabba et al. (1999) and Baumeister (1991) have build up a considerable bank of data to date about the social traits, trends and aspects of BDSM participants over the last 25 years, and a future study could add to it with data from this decade. Relationship status would allow for a piece of common social data to be analysed about the population, while preferred BDSM activities would allow understanding of how common certain types of 'hard' play is. BDSM is an incredibly diverse activity and it would be worth exploring whether there is a difference between an individual who enjoys spanking or biting and an individual who enjoys branding or mummification.

Another limitation of this study lies with the SECS; it is a very useful tool, but it does have issues with cultural adjustment. Although adjustments can be made, it is still somewhat vague in what it asks the participant. One respondent noted that "I'm very much pro-choice but it felt wrong saying I felt extremely positive towards abortion." Limited government also raised some questions due to it's ambiguity, and fiscal responsibility is another phrase that was not always understood. One remedy for this would be to add in a description for each item asked on the SECS. This study could also have benefited from the addition of a separate questionnaire dealing with sexual liberalism or conservatism; the Sexual Liberalism/Conservatism Scale developed by Guerra & Gouveia (2007) could have provided a more complete picture of the sample, as it would give data of their social, economic and sexual conservatism and whether there is a correlation. However, Guerra (2012) noted that those with social conservatism tend to demonstrate sexual conservatism, but that study used a Basic Values Survey, not a liberal/conservative scale.

Future Research Recommendations

As with most studies, a larger sample size would be recommended. The age groups were not representative of a general population sample, with almost 91.4% of the sample aged 44 or under, and over 70% of the sample solely aged 25 to 34, the older demographics were not studied in depth. However, the 55 to 64 sample of post-2012 BDSM participants was higher than several other groups and would benefit from further expansion and research to see if this extends to the general population. The effect of changing hormonal levels and its impact on sexual activity warrants further clarification, as does whether self-confidence or self-awareness levels change with age and if there is a correlation with sexual experimentation. Studies show that while older people accept less sexual activity as a part of getting older, they still cite it as important (Gott & Hinchliff, 2003) so it seems worthwhile seeing if the introduction of BDSM into mainstream culture has made it more acceptable for older people with which to reinvigorate their sex lives. As a related topic, asking BDSM practitioners if there has been a change in the level of acceptance toward participants since 2012 following Sprott & Berkey's (2015) claim of increased acceptance.

A clearer control sample and BDSM sample would also help a future study by making clear any significant differences that were between groups in terms of conservatism or any other piece of data. As stated previously, the Sexual Liberalism/Conservatism Scale would result in even more clarity when used on a control sample too. As referenced earlier, further research would be beneficial on the types and level of BDSM activity that is currently active among the community, especially post-Fifty Shades of Grey; the reasoning for this is that Fifty Shades of Grey introduced BDSM to an entirely new audience or made BDSM experimentation more acceptable for that audience. However, the activities referenced in the book are considered quite 'light' by the BDSM community and thus updated data about the

present-day BDSM activities would be useful to contrast with existing data (Connolly, 2006). Also, investigating what types of intelligence are inherent in BDSM practitioners would be worthwhile; it is possible that different types of intelligence may correlate with differing BDSM interests or activities: for example, whether verbal intelligence be linked to verbal humiliation. Another interesting avenue of research could be to see if there are any physical links to the dominant/submissive role choices; for example, research has already been carried out on testosterone & cortisol levels in BDSM participants (Sagarin, Cutler, Cutler, Lawler-Sagarin, & Matuszewich, 2009) but there may be other variables which can be tested, such as weight, height, estrogen levels or even to build on the study by Stark et al. (2005) where they measured reactions to erotic imagery using fMRI; this could be expanded to test reactions to gradually more intense or varied BDSM imagery in an attempt to measure when the participants experience pleasure and where they experience disgust. This would ideally be combined with a questionnaire that is applied to a large sample group which asks which BDSM practices are favoured by the participants, and by combining both the fMRI and the questionnaire, a spectrum could be compiled of BDSM interests and activities of varying types and intensities. This could give a broader understanding of how certain BDSM interests fit together, whether there are common links, and also may lead to understanding why certain personality types or individuals with traits gravitate toward their favoured BDSM interests. Finally, applying mindfulness research to BDSM practitioners could result in an interesting study, as mindfulness can help achieve flow state (Moore, 2013), and flow state can result in pleasurable high-performance (Payne, Jackson, Noh, & Stine-Morrow, 2011).

Conclusion

The present study has shown that in a post-Fifty Shades of Grey society, those practicing BDSM are now in the majority with females in particular introducing and participating in it in increasing numbers since 2012; this suggests that the influence of mass media on sexual practices is significant. The present study also shows that although there may not be a difference in conservatism levels between those who practice BDSM and those who do not, the social acceptance and embracing of a niche sexual practice has resulted in a new and significantly more conservative demographic joining and participating in BDSM activities.

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Appendix

Information Sheet

My name is Colm Marren and I am conducting research in the Dublin Business School Department of Psychology that explores how world view can impact on sexual practices. This research is being conducted as part of my studies and will be submitted for examination.

You are invited to take part in this study and participation involves completing this anonymous survey. While the survey asks some questions that might cause some minor negative feelings, it has been used widely in research. If any of the questions do raise difficult feelings for you, contact information for support services are included on the final page.

Participation is completely voluntary and you are not obliged to take part. Participation is also anonymous and confidential. Thus responses cannot be attributed to any one participant. For this reason, it will not be possible to withdraw from participation after the questionnaire has been collected.

The data from the questionnaires will be securely stored on a password protected computer.

It is important that you understand that by completing and submitting the questionnaire that you are consenting to participate in the study.

Should you require any further information about the research, please contact Colm Marren by email at [redacted] or by phone at ([redacted]).

My supervisor Aoife Cartwright can be contacted at [redacted]

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

Kind regards,

Colm Marren

Questionnaire

What is your age?

- 18 to 24
- 25 to 34
- 35 to 44
- 45 to 54
- 55 to 64
- 65 to 74
- 75 or older

This research adopts an inclusive approach to gender and gender identity. Please enter your gender / gender identity as you wish below:

Amended Social & Economic Conservatism Scale

“Please indicate the extent to which you feel positive or negative towards each issue. Scores of 0 indicate greater negativity, and scores of 10 indicate greater positivity. Scores of 5 indicate that you feel neutral about the issue.”

- Abortion
- Limited Government
- Military & National Security
- Religion
- Welfare
- Benefits
- Immigration

“Please indicate the extent to which you feel positive or negative towards each issue. Scores of 0 indicate greater negativity, and scores of 10 indicate greater positivity. Scores of 5 indicate that you feel neutral about the issue.”

- Traditional Marriage
- Traditional Values
- Fiscal Responsibility
- Business
- The Family Unit
- Nationalism

Are you or have you ever been involved with any elements of BDSM? (this may include dressing up, role play, spanking, choking, bondage, discipline, sadism, masochism or dominance and submission?)

- Yes
- No

Was this BDSM activity introduced during or after 2012?

- Yes - it was introduced during or since 2012
- No - it was introduced prior to 2012

End Page / Support Services

Thank you for taking this survey.

If you have experienced any negative emotions or feelings while taking this survey, you can contact one of the services below:

[Dublin Rape Crisis Centre](#): 1800 778 888

[One in Four](#): 01 6624070 / info@oneinfour.ie

[Samaritans](#): 116 123 / jo@samaritans.org

[HSE Sexual Assault Treatment Units information](#)