Nazi Uniform Fetish and Role Playing: A Subculture of Erotic Evil

The word “Nazi” typically evokes thoughts of Anti-Semitism, war crimes, and the Holocaust. To be sure, war crimes and genocide were committed by some Nazis and this research is not meant as a defense of, or being in support of, those activities. Nor is this work an endorsement of the ideologies and activities of supremacist groups. Rather, this study is an empirical work on Nazi fetish and role-playing as an active and ongoing component within the bondage, discipline/dominance, and sadomasochism (BDSM) subculture. An analysis of BDSM subculture is consistent with the discipline of popular culture’s examination of “subcultures” and “emergent cultures” (King, 2012, p. 687). In detailing the history of popular culture as a discipline, Calweti (1976, p. 166) writes “popular culture as a phrase symbolizes an attitude ranging between neutrality and enthusiasm for the same kind of cultural products which would have been condemned as garbage by many earlier intellectuals and artists.” Scholars (Weinberg, Colin, & Moser, 1984; Weinberg, Williams, & Moser, 1984; Moser & Levitt, 1987; Sandnabba, et al, 2002; Richters, et al, 2008; Stiles & Clark, 2011) have examined this “cultural product” of BDSM and informed us of a vibrant and growing subculture. Such work expands our knowledge of popular culture and the present study accomplishes the same. We do so from a sociological perspective, one of the disciplines used in the analysis of popular culture, a “growth industry in the American academy” (Traube, 1996, p. 127).

In their comprehensive account of the analytic tools that have legitimized popular culture as a scholarly interest, Mukeji and Schudson (1986) note the contribution of Erving Goffman’s work on performances in understanding it as a “key form of cultural behavior.” They write, “performance is a kind of activity that is formally staged or an aspect of everyday life in which a person is oriented to and intends to have some effect on an audience” (Mukeji & Schudson, 1986, p. 56). We draw on the seminal work of Goffman to describe and explain how Nazi uniform fetishists and role-players actively manipulate symbols (i.e., to perform) in order to dramatize their own eroticism and thereby influence the perceptions of others (i.e., an audience). Role-playing is a performance and Calweti (1980) argues performances are an important aspect of popular culture. Performances establish societal archetypical roles, allow for a variety of expression of the human condition, and make accessible the complexities of said human condition. A social networking site dedicated to Nazi Uniform fetish and role-playing serves as the vehicle for examining the performances of these role-players. We consider demographic, role, and thematic variation among participants of the website and present the results of a content analysis of messages posted to that site. By exploring emergent themes and rationales for involvement, we elucidate how it is that members of this subculture engage one of the darkest sets of historical imagery and draw erotic pleasure from these evil images.
References to erotic activities involving bondage, discipline, dominance, and submission can be found in ancient Egypt (Weinberg, Williams, & Moser, 1984). Evidence of the practice also exists in fifteenth century European literature (Moser & Levitt, 1987). In the eighteenth century, Marquis de Sade simultaneously shocked and enthralled with writings such as Philosophy in the Boudoir (2000) that depicted graphic scenes mixing pain with sex. During the 1800's, Sacher-Masoch penned Venus in Furs (2010) which portrayed complete sexual and mental submission of one to another with that submission involving pain.

The influence of both is seen in their names serving as the bases for the “S & M” in BDSM (Sade and Sado, and Masoch and Masochist). BDSM is the “collection of overlapping initials intended to identify three components of erotic power play.” Bondage and discipline (BD) is “combining the restraint of movement with the punishment and/or control of the partner.” Dominance and submission (DS) is the “umbrella term for the exchange of erotic power or control of one partner of another” and “does not require physical pain.” Sadomasochism (SM) is “the consensual giving and receiving of intense erotic sensation” (Henkin & Holiday 1996, pp. 61 & 72). BDSM, as a sociological process, is a consensual role-play that follows a “script” in which the themes of power and control are prevalent (Weinberg, Colin, & Moser, 1984; Weinberg, 1987). The scenes are typically erotic in nature and may involve fetishes or pain. What occurs in a scene is consensual and negotiated among the participants and a scene can be stopped at any time by the use of a “safe-word” (see Miller & Devon, 1995; Moser & Madeson, 1998; Midori, 2005; Weiss, 2011, and Wiseman, 1998 for thorough discussions of BDSM ideologies and lifestyle). Generally, as compared to the larger population, those involved in BDSM are well-educated, affluent, and emotionally and psychologically well-adjusted (Moser & Levitt, 1987; Weinberg et al., 1987; Sandnabba, et al., 2002; Richters, et al., 2008; Stiles & Clark, 2011). BDSM is increasingly becoming integrated into popular culture. Fetish gear and dominatrix-inspired clothing have appeared on fashion runways (Moore, 2007). In addition, mainstream pop singers Rhiannon and Lady Gaga have incorporated, to various degrees, BDSM activities and fetish fashions into their videos and performances. The BDSM themed book Fifty Shades of Grey tops the New York Times bestseller lists in E-Book and paperback trade fiction (New York Times, 2012). Currently, the eyeglass company Pearle Vision is running a commercial featuring a “naughty librarian” who says in a sultry voice, “You have a lot of late fees mister, maybe someone should teach you to return your library books on time” (the subtext being the delinquent borrower is going to be punished). Although not yet mainstream, BDSM is on the cusp of acceptance as an erotic activity and is certainly on the minds of many.

Freud (1961) argued that the locus of a fetish lies in the male’s unresolved belief in the mother’s (missing) penis and castration anxiety over losing his own. The fetish serves as a substitute for the woman’s penis, thus reducing the anxiety. Objects not phallic in nature that are associated with the mother can serve as the fetish. Common items are lingerie and shoes. Unlike Freud’s focus on the unresolved crises over the sexualized phallic mother and castration anxiety as the impetus for an
Nazi Uniform Fetish and Role Playing:  

object serving as a proxy for a mother's "penis," others view fetishes as variable (Gamman & Makinen, 1994; Sullivan, 2003). From this perspective, fetishism ranges from particular sexual practices and situations to the fetish replacing a sexual partner. Sex educator Midori defines a fetishist as "someone whose sensual and sexual arousal is greatly enhanced by objects, body parts and other elements not directly related to intercourse" (2005, p. 127). This perspective and definition allows for the inclusion of all types and manner of fetishes with sensitivity to culture, meaning, and historical context—such as Nazism. The study of Nazism within broader scholarly frameworks has experienced resurgence. Betts (2002, p. 552) writes:

While assessments of Nazi culture were once largely confined to painting, sculpture, architecture, literature and propaganda film, a generation of new scholars has begun to reconsider the significance of advertising, entertainment cinema, industrial design, television, autobahns, pop culture eroticism and other 'low culture' enterprises.

Nazi uniform fetish and role-playing can be categorized as an aspect of "pop culture eroticism" and the present study is consistent with the work of other scholars on related topics. For example, Frost (2003) fully develops the process by which Nazism (used synonymously with fascism) became eroticized as a mechanism of geo-political propaganda. She posits that a concerted effort was made by the Western allies during World I, and more so in World War II, to present Germans/Nazis as associated with sexual deviance (during those time periods BDSM was viewed as a form of sexual deviance/perversion). Parallels were made between the pathology and "violence" of BDSM and Nazism where the oppressed (i.e., bottom/submissive) was unwillingly compelled to engage in unpleasant sexual acts at the hands of the oppressor (i.e., top/dominant). However, this application was misplaced, for as Frost (2003, p. 32) argues:

This account of sadomasochism as a 'false pleasure' is unsatisfying for a number of reasons. First, it assumes that fantasies of violence and power are pathological—or fascist. Second, it uses 'masochism' and 'sadism' to denote simple characterizations of very complex relations (the 'masochistic masses' or the 'sadistic leader') and personality disorders ('the sadomasochistic personality type') without any precise definition of these terms or their actual applicability to fascist practices. BDSM is a diverse subculture involving various types of activities and forms of expression.

Applying Frost's (2003) analysis to the present study, Nazi uniform fetishists and role-players represent the diversity of BDSM subculture as it is a very unique activity with a specific form of expression. The most salient form of this expression is seen in the style and fashion of these fetishists and role-players. Style and fashion express autonomy, proclaims messages, establishes boundaries, and
generates definitions of a subculture (Hebdige, 1979). For uniform fetishists, the uniform creates a context for the BDSM scene. A Nazi uniform is just one type of uniform fetish. We suggest for these participants, they are attracted to Nazism as a movement steeped in violence and evil and the uniform is representative of this movement. BDSM practitioners use the term "scene" when referring to erotic power exchange and as such, Goffinan's dramaturgical analysis of social interaction is most appropriate.

Dramaturgical social action analysis of interaction has had a significant impact on sociology and related fields (Blumer, 1972; Collins, 1986; Williams, 1986; Burns, 1991; Chriss, 1993; Chriss, 1995; Chriss, 1996; Jaworski, 1996; Trevino, 2003; Smith, 2006; Jacobson, 2009; Menand, 2009; Brewster & Bell, 2010). Dramaturgy views social life as similar to theater life where societal members are much like actors on a stage assuming roles and playing them out to full effect (Elkin, 1958; Goffinan, 1959; Manning, 1991). Goffinan argues that it is in the interest of an actor to actively manipulate their performance so they will be viewed favorably by others (Guretitch, 1984; Batterstill, 1990). For those involved in Nazi uniform fetish and role-play, to be perceived as "evil" is the favored outcome and this performance is facilitated by the wearing of a Nazi uniform.

Methods

A social network website designed for those interested in BDSM and fetish was used as the data source. Consistent with Munt, Basset, and O'Riordan (2002), and in keeping with ethical guidelines as suggested by those scholars, the actual name of the public domain site is not divulged here. The postings used as data were public information readily available to anyone visiting the site. The use of such public information (including direct quoting) in scholarly research is akin to the use of other types of public media and poses no ethical dilemma (Basset & O'Riordan, 2002). This site has over 900,000 members and an Alexa ranking under 3,000. Alexa is a company that ranks websites based on popularity (http://www.alexa.com/company). The lower a site's ranking, the more popular the site is. A ranking of under 100,000 is considered very good (Google is number one and Facebook number two). Based on the site's Alexa ranking, it is a very popular website with a great deal of activity.

Within the site are various discussion groups based on interest. One of these groups is comprised of members interested in "Nazi Uniform Fetish and Role-playing." The group's creator states the forum is for discussion of "Nazi style uniforms, race charged psychological BDSM play, and exploitation film style imagery." There are at least twelve other groups on the site about related topics, including "Females of the Third Reich" (114 members) and "SS [Schutzstaffel—Protection Squad] Uniforms and Those Who Love Them" (162). Nazi Uniform Fetish and Role-playing was selected not only because it is the largest of these (whether measured by number of participants, number of threads, or number of posts), but also because its postings entail the most thorough discussions of the use of Nazi uniforms as a fetish and in BDSM role-playing.

In studying coming out among lesbians, Munt, Basset, and O'Riordan (2002) conducted a quantitative survey to assess the demographics of their sample; a
similar method of recording is utilized in the current study. Frequencies were recorded for site members who indicated gender and BDSM role (e.g., top, bottom, switch, etc.). For more robust data, categories were collapsed based on role similarity. Top, dom, sadist, master, mistress, and sadomasochist were collapsed into "Dom." Slave, bottom, submissive, and masochist were collapsed into "Sub." Fetishist and kinkster were combined into "Fetishist." On the site, a "kinkster" is one interested in BDSM and fetish, but may or may not participate in BDSM scenes or practice/experience their fetish. Thirty-eight members of the discussion forum listed their BDSM identity as "unsure" or "undefined" and were excluded from the data resulting in a total N of 617. Data was placed into cross tabulations and subjected to a Chi-square test of significance. Content analysis was used to interpret qualitative data gleaned from posts and informative excerpts representing major themes identified.

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Data

A statistically significant difference exists between gender and BDSM role. The greatest contribution to the total $\chi^2$ value comes from the fact that there are more men that are dominant than would be expected by chance (146 observed versus 117 expected), more women that are submissive than would be expected by chance (77 versus 50), and more others that are switches than would be expected by chance (24 versus 13). These three cells alone contribute 31 (62.2%) to the total $\chi^2$ of 49.86 (7.2, 14.6, and 9.2 respectively).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BDSM Role</td>
<td>Dominant</td>
<td>146 (61.5%)</td>
<td>76 (32.1%)</td>
<td>15 (6.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDSM Role</td>
<td>Submissive</td>
<td>43 (32.7%)</td>
<td>77 (58.5%)</td>
<td>11 (8.4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDSM Role</td>
<td>Switch</td>
<td>54 (43.2%)</td>
<td>47 (37.6%)</td>
<td>24 (19.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDSM Role</td>
<td>Fetishist</td>
<td>65 (52.3%)</td>
<td>42 (33.9%)</td>
<td>17 (13.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>308</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>617</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$\chi^2 = 49.86$

$\chi^2 .001$, where df=6 is 22.46, significant to p< .001.

Qualitative Data

Content analysis of posts found that members of Nazi Uniform Fetish and Role-playing discussed a variety of aspects of Nazi-related fetishism in more than 300 threads including more than ten thousand comments. For the most part, members discussed the uniforms themselves, including where to acquire them and pointedly disavowed white supremacy and anti-Semitism, emphasizing only the eroticism associated with the uniforms. Many posts commented on the sex appeal of the uniforms and fictional characters from the media (primarily films) that were
particularly sensual in their portrayal of Nazis. The excerpts below speak to the sensuality of power and control, cornerstones of BDSM. In response to a post asking, “What makes a sexy Nazi?” responses included:

A well cared for athletic, mature female body, subtly made up fair skin and hard steely blue eyes, long dark hair gathered up carefully in a high ponytail. She is very stylish and well groomed, a pristine women's tailored Black SS uniform laid out for her on the bed beside her as she sits gracefully at her dressing table in her delicate, demure lingerie and Fully fashioned seamed and Cuban heel Nylons leaning elegantly forward and to the side to pull up the zips on her gleaming almost mirror polished Black Leather 5” heel knee boots. Her visor cap, Black Leather Gloves, 4ft bull whip and SS officer’s belt on her pillow along with the heavy Leather holster that shrouds her 9mm P38. The interest in Nazi role-playing and the Nazi fetish is for most people (I can't vouch for everyone), is a stimulating response to strong imagery, well tailored uniforms, and notions of power and fear.

Two characters from the film world were most often cited as epitomizing a sexy Nazi. One was the SS-Lieutenant Amon Goeth in Schindler’s List (released in 1993). Participants spoke of his cold, evil good looks, ruthless coolness, and his impeccable style. The other character was the female sadomasochistic commandant of a prisoner-of-war camp in Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS, a 1975 campy sexploitation film. Ilsa personifies traits of the female dominatrix with her buxom figure, fondness for torture, violence, and the humiliation of men; all while wearing revealing SS-style uniforms. There is an element of fact to the aesthetic appeal (i.e., the sexiness) of Nazis as German designer Hugo Boss manufactured uniforms for the SS, SA (Storm Troopers), and Hitler Youth (New York Times, 1997).

As seen in Table 1, results for gender by BDSM role is consistent with what is generally found in the BDSM community: more men are dominant than women and more women submissive than men. In Nazi Germany, the role of the woman was to be submissive to men and to the State. According to the ideology of the Nazi leadership, the place of a woman was that of “mother, housewife, guardian of racial purity, transmitter of German culture, and supporter of national economic policy” (Rupp 1977, p. 372). The findings of the present study do not support this ideology as the number of females who identified as dominant (N=76) or submissive (N=77) was equal, less one. This finding is suggestive of the paradox of the Nazi woman. She has been represented and perceived as both powerful and subordinate. Richard Wagner has been credited with influencing Hitler’s worldview (Kohler, 2001). His widow, Cosima, was instrumental in sustaining the Beyruth festival which featured Wagner’s works and where Hitler was a frequent attendee. Houston Chamberlain, Wagner’s biographer, wrote to her “one of the most wonderful manifestations of your strength of character is the way you mete out punishment where punishment is due” (Kohler 2001, p. 123). Conversely, Eva Braun, Hitler’s mistress, is characterized as wandering around the Berghof “with dewy eyes and a
Nazi Uniform Fetish and Role Playing:

tortured expression... Hitler's circle saw her as a 'bird in a gilded cage' who as Hitler's bedfellow condemned herself to a life of self-denial" (Eberle & Uhl, 2005). The apparent contradiction of a strong, punishing woman versus the ideal German woman of the Third Reich may not be that much of a contradiction in BDSM. Cosima was imbued with the qualities of a Dominant while Eva possessed submissive characteristics and both roles are equally represented among women in the sample.

Participants are very careful and go to great lengths to establish that they are not anti-Semitic or supremacists, and are aware that confusion is possible as indicated by this participant:

People tend to automatically assume that someone who finds the uniform or the role-play sexy, is actually a Nazis themselves. Which I'm sure can be the case from time to time but couldn't be further from the truth for me. I'm actually the exact opposite.

Members recognize the connotations that the uniform inspires, and one called it “a foregone conclusion that to wear a Nazi uniform where it would cause offense is just rude and dumb.” They thus report keeping their fetish private, even from family. The closest expression of anti-Semitism was a Jewish participant explaining that Jewish slurs excite her not only despite but in opposition to anti-Semitism. She stated, “I feel as though taking ownership of these words, and especially using them for my sexual gratification, is the biggest [derogation] I can give to real life anti-Semitism.” In another post, the same participant wrote, “There are a lot of Jews in this group, like me. Except we're clever enough to know the difference between a fetish and actually committing racist acts.” A different member noted that “the biggest fan of my ex's SS-uniform was a friend of ours who is Jewish.” Self-identified Jewish members varied in their interest in Nazi role-play: One asserted that “Jews like to play Nazis and Nazis like to play Jews,” another wrote, “I'm a Jew who likes to keep being a Jew in my Nazi torture role-playing.” Not a single post expressed explicit anti-Semitism.

It is the violent nature of Nazism, not anti-Semitism, which motivates the self-presentation of one as “Nazi” among Nazi uniform fetishists. It is the image of violence that is being portrayed, more so than actual violence. For, as has been noted, BDSM play is highly controlled (e.g., consensual scene negotiation and the use of safe-words). It is not anti-Semitism that is the attraction, but other components of Nazism—namely, violence and power. For those involved in BDSM, (consensual) “violence” and power are erotic.

Conclusion

Nazi uniform fetish and role-play is just that, the playing of a role. The fetish serves to enhance the BDSM experience and has little to do with white supremacy or anti-Semitism. The world of BDSM is an erotically charged arena that incorporates a variety of interests, desires, and tastes. It is the association with evil that participants in Nazi uniform fetish and role-play find appealing. The self-presentation of erotic evil serves to contribute to the quality of the BDSM experience and allow
participants in this subculture a safe and accepting environment in which to explore and express their fetish. This suggests, as oxymoronic as it sounds, that evil isn’t all that bad. The incorporation of evil symbols in a safe, non-harmful, consensual manner to enhance one’s pleasure suggests some performances (i.e., role-playing) serve a purpose in popular culture; it allows us to be bad.

California State University, Northridge
David A. Lopez
California State University, Northridge
Ellis Godard

References


