

Finding A Home In Kink:
A Scientific Study on the rate of Autism in Kink

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The symptoms and behaviors of people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and the practices of people involved in the BDSM lifestyle are, at their very core, intriguingly similar. Unfortunately, their histories are also distinctly similar on the social and societal levels: BDSM was heavily pathologized and perceived as evil or demonic, and people with ASD were infantilized, seen as freaks, and sometimes thought to be dangerous to other kids. Both could disgrace a family, were seen as a devastating diagnosis, and professionals would recommend institutionalization. With their history, until the last decade or so, nobody would think there could be any possible connection between the two. It took the revolution of the internet age and social media sites to bring the world primary perspectives from people who were both Kinky and diagnosed with ASD.

The past five to ten years have led to an increase in visibility and advocacy for both communities. Autistic people have started organizations, like Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), that are beginning to rival Autism Speaks, one of the most well-known ASD organizations and the most detested by the Autistic community. Autistic adults have started fighting for more respect and accommodations, demanding change and equality on all levels, including social, legal, medical, education, and more. They are fighting against abusive practices like ABA therapy (Shkedy et al.,2022) and shouting to the world that although they are different in certain aspects, they are still human. This humanity includes wanting sexual and romantic relationships just as much as anyone else. The Kink community has also had to lead an advocacy fight for themselves over the last several decades in areas such as family custody (Wright,2018), false domestic violence accusations (Corry,2022), and dungeons getting

shut down due to government overreach. In addition, media such as *50 Shades of Grey* has unwittingly thrust them into the spotlight, causing more negative attention than positive. Although the Kink community has not been trying to change hearts and minds about their community like the Autism community has, they have been trying to increase the legitimacy of their educational material. They have also had a hand in advocating for LGBT rights throughout the years, as their histories are very closely intertwined (Lopez et al., 2021).

With this heightened visibility and advocacy on both fronts, combined with more primary perspectives thanks to the internet, a significant question has emerged: What is with all the neurodivergent people in Kink? The Oxford Dictionary defines neurodivergent as "differing in neurological function from what is considered typical." Over the last few years, the social recognition of these diagnoses has shifted to "neurodivergencies" instead of seeing them as a disability, disorder, or mental illness. Unfortunately, this shift has not yet transferred over to the clinical realm. When approaching these diagnoses as "neurodivergencies" instead of diagnoses, it may show the world that society does not fit with their brains, rather than their brains not fitting with society. One of the most significant exceptions to this rule seems to be among personal reports within the BDSM communities. One of the most frequent subjects mentioned among two of the largest BDSM subreddits is mental health and neurodivergence. Undoubtedly, the Kink community draws in those with neurodivergent brains; It is similar to how statistically one is highly likely to find someone with ADHD or Autism floating around a Comic Con, a Renaissance Faire, an E-Sports convention, or formerly Warped Tour. The "normal" world tends to make neurodivergent individuals feel like outsiders, so

they then clamor towards more open-minded and accepting communities of things that are considered "weird," "freaky," or potentially "childish." An offshoot to this question that I am posing is this: Do Autistic people have a heightened interest in Kink and BDSM than Allistic people? I hypothesize that there is a higher rate of people with ASD in the Kink community than in the general population.

There is no research on this hypothesis specifically and minimal research on Autism in Kink in general. There are two likely reasons why this is: first is that Autism has been highly infantilized and de-sexualized over time, and second is that both of these communities face so much backlash individually that combining them could spell social disaster. The most in-depth research on Autism in Kink was an undergraduate thesis by Boucher (2018), who wrote about why Autistic people are drawn toward Kink. The first reason is that of rules and structure, BDSM dynamics live within carefully detailed and negotiated rules and structure to ensure that the needs, wants, and limits of both the Dominant and submissive are being met. People who live with ASD have a drastically higher rate than allistic people of needing structure and rules to function, in part due to being very logical thinkers. The second reason is sensory seeking, which is integrated into almost any type of play within the BDSM world, including bondage, impact, sensory play, temperature play, and more. Sensory-seeking behavior, more commonly known as stimming, is prevalent among those with an ASD diagnosis. Boucher confirmed that "Participants who reported having a diagnosis showed stronger positive correlations between sensory BDSM behaviors and sensory stimulation, as well as for BDSM control behaviors and having a need for attention to detail and structure than those who did not report a diagnosis" (pp. 40). This research shows how and why

the behaviors of Autistic individuals and Kink practices fit together; however it does not examine the rate of Autism in Kink.

Method

My methodology was originally observational research by looking at Reddit posts in two specific subreddit communities, r/bdsmadvice, with approximately 318,000 members, and r/bdsmcommunity, with approximately 439,000 members. The criteria was that it had to be posted within either of the two BDSM-specific subreddits and have the word Autistic, Autism, or ASD in the title or body post. I decided not to put a time frame on when it had to have been posted, as I did not want to rule out any posts. Even if it were five days or fifty years ago, if someone documented that they were on the spectrum and were involved in BDSM, then it would count towards the point that there are Autistic individuals in the BDSM community. I was not going to conduct a survey because of rules in both subreddits that ban research posts due to previous issues. I planned to count the comments and see how many people in the subreddits had said: "I am autistic ."My methodology shifted at the last minute when I had difficulty finding data to back my hypothesis up.

My second methodology was going to be a single post in a single subreddit, R/BDSMAdvice. With the moderators' permission, I asked the community in a poll whether they had Autism Spectrum Disorder through a series of 6 comments, of which I requested participants only to upvote one comment per person. The comments were as follows: I am diagnosed with ASD or Aspergers (before DSM-5 revisions), I am self-diagnosed ASD, a psychology professional has said I likely have ASD but I have not been formally diagnosed/tested, I have a diagnosis (ADHD, depression, anxiety,

bipolar, schizophrenia, etc.) that is not ASD, I am dual diagnosed ADHD/ASD, and I have no diagnosis at all. This method posed a particular challenge which was upvotes versus downvotes. Although I requested people only to upvote one option and not to downvote any of those six comments, there is no way to control that, which can skew the data. This methodology was primarily used out of respect for the subreddit so they could see the data in real-time.

Upon community feedback, the finalized methodology was a poll utilizing a website that restricted participants to voting only once. This methodology posed fewer challenges than the previous two; however, it still posed problems that will be addressed later in the discussion.

Results

The number of participants was 297 over the course of 5 days.

Diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	13%
Self-diagnosed ASD	18%
Dual diagnosed ADHD/ASD	13%
Diagnosed with ADHD, or other mental health disorders	34%
Professional has stated it is likely I have ASD, but no official diagnosis/testing	12%
No mental health diagnosis at all	10%

Discussion

In this research paper, the overall population being studied is the Kink Community. There is a particular brand of challenges when studying this population, as there is no specific definition of what it means to be kinky inside or outside the community. This Venn diagram created by Dr. Keely Kolmes, a psychologist, best describes this.



(Kolmes, 2019)

The second challenge to studying this population is gatekeeping, which the kink community does mostly to protect itself from outsiders with nefarious intentions. A great example of this gatekeeping appears in the Kinky Kollege¹ registration agreement:

4. I agree that I am joining a private organization, not open to the public. As a member of such organization, I willingly and with full consent and knowledge waive and relinquish any claim, legal or otherwise, that I might make as to the offensive nature of anything I might see or experience while a member of this organization.

¹ A large semi-annual Kink convention located in Chicago. Requires a background check and a member agreement.

5. Should I at any time attempt to make such a claim, I recognize that I would do so solely as a means of entrapping and/or soliciting the arrest of other members of The Leather SINS Social Club, NFP

This agreement protects the community, organizations, and conventions from legal ramifications. Although everything down within the walls of the convention is consensual, there are laws across the US that make Kink participation illegal; therefore many dungeons and conventions have waivers saying members or participants will not report them to law enforcement, or if one is law enforcement that they are there on their private leisure time and anything they see would be inadmissible at court.

Another example of gatekeeping is that of very widely agreed-upon rules within online communities, such as subreddits. The post advertising this studies poll showcased an excellent example of the moderators protecting the community, even from those who claim to be a part of it. Throughout the first few days that the post was live, it received some backlash from community members, which is not to be unexpected. One of the most vile backlashes it received was the following comment: "Wait a sec! People that look to be tied up & beaten might be nuts? GET OUT! What? Men that like to abuse girls might not be playing with a full deck? GET OUT, heathen! Do we really need ANY kind of research to know that? I like what I like but not for a second will I fool myself into thinking I'm the most mentally stable person around." This comment was deleted, and the Redditor was permanently banned from the subreddit. Another Redditor's response to this comment showcases precisely why the community wants to protect ourselves from such backlash: "I'm sorry, are you really in here equating a neurodivergence to being "nuts," and consensual Kink to abuse? If you

actually think any of that is the case, gonna tell you right now all you're doing is telling on yourself, and your own harmful/unhealthy mindsets, not making the grand sweeping statement that you think you're making." The type of unhealthy mindset showcased is typical for people outside the community who believe that Kink is abuse and that we are all mentally ill; the two papers I have previously written for this class show precisely why these two assumptions are untrue.

While the mindset of gatekeeping is entirely understood as a kink practitioner myself, it can be frustrating as someone pursuing research. Fairly often, it is when psychology and science say that something is okay that society will agree, but in some cases, they still might not; Kink is one of those cases. However, the research that has been done is minimal and relatively recent. Therefore, if the community continues to gatekeep themselves against positive research, they may not be as quickly accepted into society as they could be. This gatekeeping did impact my ability to do a better study since I believed I could not research directly through the subreddits. In fairness, I waited until the last minute to request permission; therefore, my negligence impacted the results. Within the post on the subreddit, I outright asked for neurodivergent participation, and by doing so, I increased the rate of neurodivergent participation. I also explicitly explained what my study was about and specifically for the information I sought. The reasoning was partly due to the time constraint, partly due to my lack of education, and partly due to wanting to be honest and respect the participation of those in the survey. Since the research on marginalized communities has not always been well-intentioned, I wanted to minimize secrecy to avoid making the community feel like they were being misled or deceived.

Due to these challenges, and the law of large numbers, the results' accuracy is undoubtedly skewed. The survey received approximately 2% participation out of the approximately 30,000 views on the post and only approximately 0.2% participation out of the population of the subreddit. I expected a rate of approximately 8-10% to classify with an official diagnosis of ASD. In combining the official and dual diagnoses, I ended up with a rate of 26%. I also expected a similar rate for those with an almost or self-diagnosis, but these two combined ended up with a rate of 30%. The rate of kids being diagnosed with ASD in America, according to the CDC as of 2020, is about 1 in 36 or 3%. This study's results show a potential for a higher rate of autistic individuals in the kink community than in the general population; however, it requires better and further research to clarify.

Despite the accuracy of the skewed response data, one specific point of pure, unskewed data did support another theory of mine: There is interest from the community to research neurodivergence and mental health in connection to Kink and BDSM. In approximately the first 36 hours after posting on the subreddit (Posted at 0030 May 4th, data retrieved at 1415 May 5th), there were approximately 29,100 views of the post itself, approximately 9% of the subreddits' members. This shows that at least a significant minority of the kink community is intrigued by the idea of this research.

A better study could be done through a single-blind study based on a demographics survey, including but not limited to age, nationality, ethnicity, religion, mental health diagnosis, gender, education, occupation, income level, Kink experience, and Kink preferences. Nevertheless, overall, I think my hypothesis was somewhat

validated, and there is interest within the community to research further not just the connection between Autism and Kink but any neurodivergencies and Kink.

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