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Whips & Chains Excite Me: BDSM and Social Acceptance

in the Context of Normative Influences

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Abstract

Although public interest in the BDSM community is increasing, practitioners continue to experience marginalization, as well as a great level of stigma and discrimination stemming from several facets of society. This study examined levels of social acceptance of dominant/submissive relationships when two factors were manipulated: (a) gender of the dominant, and (b) exposure to normalizing information about a Dominant/submissive relationship. The Attitudes About Sadomasochism Scale (ASMS; Yost, 2010) and a set of original items were used to gather opinions about the BDSM community and Dominant/submissive relationships, yielding two measures of social acceptance relating to BDSM practices. Two separate ANOVAs revealed partial support for the hypotheses, indicating that female participants reported significantly higher levels of social acceptance when the Dominant/submissive scene was accompanied by a normative interview about the couple. Suggestions for the development of anti-discrimination programs involving normative information exposure are discussed.

Keywords: BDSM, dominance/submission, gender, sadomasochism, stereotypes, stigma

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BDSM is one of the most misunderstood areas of human sexuality, and as such, those

who engage in BDSM activity are members of a marginalized sexual minority (Langdridge &

Barker, 2007; Wright, 2006). Because a limitless number of sex-related variations, preferences,

labels, and activities fall under the umbrella terms "BDSM", "SM", "Leather", or "kink", for the

purposes of this study, the terms BDSM and SM are predominantly used to denote a community

of individuals and acts therein, whereas the terms "SM-identified", "practitioners", "BDSMers",

and "SMers" represent the individuals themselves. As such, several definitions are necessary:

The acronym BDSM primarily refers to bondage, discipline, dominance, submission, and

sadomasochism. "Sadomasochism" (SM) is most commonly used to describe the relationship

between those who are either sadistic (those who enjoy inflicting pain), masochistic (those who

enjoy receiving pain), or an amalgamation of the two. The combination of the terms sadism and

masochism implies that one cannot exist without the other, and thus "sadomasochism" is

considered to be the preferred term of those within the community (Langdridge & Barker, 2007;

Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006). Wright (2006) provides a concise definition for this complex concept

in that "…sadomasochism or "SM" includes a wide range of alternative sexual practices

including: Consensual power exchange, body modification, role play (which highlights the

power exchange), and intense physical and emotional stimulation in a sexual context" (p. 218).

Contrary to popular belief, power – and not the exchange of pain – is the primary basis of SM

(Cross & Matheson, 2006). It is this consensual power exchange that is the focus of the current

study.

This study examined attitudes toward sadomasochism as a variation of human sexuality, with specific inquiry into the social acceptance of dominance (D) and submission (s) within a consensual relationship. A Dominant/submissive (D/s) relationship can involve the exchange of both physical (e.g., physical sensory stimulation and restraint) and psychological (e.g., psychological discipline, power) elements between dominant and submissive partners. This type of relationship can vary in commitment to the dominant and submissive roles with relationships ranging anywhere from "strictly in the bedroom" (to enhance sexual activity) to "24/7 D/s", a far less common version of the dynamic in which the dominant and submissive roles are maintained at all times by the individuals involved. A 24/7 D/s relationship involves total power exchange interactions that extend beyond the bedroom and into day-to-day activities of the individuals in the relationship (Green, 2007). These types of relationships can be quite intricate, involving many combinations of gender, sexual orientation, number of partners, and even family units with children. Many who engage in Dominant/submissive fantasy role play do so to transform dominance and submission into a personalized, meaningful sexual experience (Yost, 2007) and report that this type of interaction is far more stimulating than purely physical relationships because it also involves engaging psychological components necessary for erotic power exchange (Langdridge & Butt, 2005). Langdridge and Butt describe the elements of erotic power exchange in Dominant/submissive role play as an experience above and beyond the physical gratification within a sexual relationship, stating that "[c]uisine is to eating as erotic life is to sex" (p. 66). Evidence of this type of kink in mainstream sexuality can be found in the form of novelty items (e.g., crop whips, fuzzy hand cuffs and blindfolds) that are ubiquitous in adult novelty stores, implying that D/s role play in some form or another may be more prevalent than public perception.

Although a visit to an adult bookstore would reveal a great percentage of material related to sadomasochism, it is a vastly under-researched area of human sexuality, possibly for two reasons: (a) It is a 'taboo' subject in mainstream society, and may therefore not be considered a topic of 'priority' for scientific inquiry, and (b) it is quite difficult to obtain information about a group that prefers to remain anonymous. Studies suggest that approximately 10 percent of the population report that they engage in BDSM activity (Kleinplatz & Moser, 2007; Reinisch, Beasley, & Kent, 1990), however this is likely a conservative estimate reflecting a social desirability response bias. It is possible that the number of individuals who report participation in BDSM activity would increase markedly if the term was defined in a broader sense to include all (milder) types of sensation or role play that some may not consider to be 'BDSM' (e.g., blindfolding, spanking, or superficial restraints such as novelty handcuffs or scarves).

Public interest in BDSM has grown significantly, especially within the last few years, with the help of several popular-culture items, among them the best-selling fictional trilogy beginning with *50 Shades of Grey* (James, 2012) in which the protagonist is a male Dominant. A Google search for "BDSM" in 2004 produced 27 million results (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006) while the same search in 2012 generated 186 million. By this measurement, online popularity of BDSM increased 588% over those 8 years. Elements of BDSM- or fetish-wear have been incorporated into mainstream fashion trends in the form of fishnet stockings, thigh-high boots, leather, and metal studs. Undoubtedly, popular culture has become an influential factor in the public's assessment of BDSM (Sisson, 2007), raising awareness outside of the BDSM community where many consider it to be a sexual subculture (Deckha, 2011; Wright, 2006).

Although interest in the BDSM subculture seems to be on the rise, the academic world has yet to match this ascent with relevant research on the topic. The research conducted on

consensual SM has been sporadic at best, with work focusing on the dominant and submissive aspects of BDSM even more limited. Virtually no empirical work has been conducted on SM-identified individuals and public perception specifically (Yost, 2010). The present study is, to this author's knowledge, novel and unique research in the field of human sexuality. The two constructs examined are (a) gender, as it applies to the sexual double standard in social acceptance levels of Dominant/submissive relationships, and (b) exposure to normative information about a Dominant/submissive couple and its effects on levels of social acceptance of sadomasochism as a variation of human sexuality. The sexual double standard and social acceptance of the BDSM community are discussed in the following sections.

The Sexual Double Standard

When asked to visualize "BDSM", most individuals would likely draw on pop culture representations consistent with the erotic, iconic images of sexy pinups in fetish gear that have been prevalent since Bettie Page's popularity as the first "mainstream dominatrix" in the1940's. This popular reference might conjure up images of a sexy leather-clad dominatrix wielding a riding crop and handcuffs standing over her cowering male submissive. Conversely, when asked the same question about male Dominants, rarely would one imagine a man doling out the whip-lashes to his subservient female partner. As a culture that does not tolerate violence against women, North Americans have grown accustomed to instinctively condemn any man who assaults a woman, and do not feel the same degree of responsibility to come to the aid of a man receiving a thrashing from his female partner. Within this context, a female dominant, or "femmedomme"/"femdom" may be considered a strong woman standing up for herself and "taking charge", whereas a male dominant may be seen as the perpetrator of domestic abuse (Chancer, 2004). This attitude is still maintained by many individuals, and while actual estimates

are difficult to ascertain, some have found that reported cases of domestic abuse rates for male and female victims are more comparable than previously thought, with women reporting slightly more cases than men (Burczycka & Conroy, 2018; Johnson & Bunge, 2001).

In a patriarchal society, men are considered to be naturally dominant, and women submissive (Bem & Lenney, 1976; McCreary & Rhodes, 2001; Spence & Helmreich, 1980). Buss and Craik (1980, 1981) have found that (a) men tend to act more dominant than women, (b) dominant acts are related to the male gender-role, while submissive acts are related to the female gender-role, and (c) both genders rate dominance as a prototypical act of men, and submission as a prototypical act of women. Therefore, in terms of sexual saliency, a female dominant may be viewed as more appealing, or more atypical, because the concept is taboo: A woman in a position of dominance is not consistent with conventional gender-role norms of North American culture in which hegemonic masculinity is predominant.

Discrimination of SM-identified Individuals

The majority of SM-identified individuals keep their sadomasochistic lifestyles separate from their "mainstream" lives and limit disclosure of their sexual interests to those who are "kink friendly", due to fear of discrimination by those opposed to their lifestyle (Wright, 2006). SM-identified people are often reluctant to "come out" to anyone outside the community for fear that in doing so they may jeopardize their jobs, friendships or familial relationships (Bezreh, Weinberg, & Edgar, 2012), become a victim of a hate crime (Herek, 2009), or compromise situations in which child custody is in question (Klein & Moser, 2006). For these reasons, most communications within the community that occur in forums such as online chat rooms, BDSM-themed social networking sites, "play parties", and local events predominantly involve the use of aliases for the sake of anonymity. Many of these individuals are aware of publically-held

stereotypes and believe that the majority of these stereotypes are based on misinformation about

the BDSM community (Barker, Gupta, & Iantaffi, 2007). Some of these stereotypes imply that

individuals who engage in BDSM-related activities are violent, mentally unstable, and sexually

irresponsible (Wright, 2006). Richters and colleagues (2008) found that in actuality, BDSM-ers

had a lower incidence of psychopathology, higher levels of self esteem, and were less likely to

be violent than the national averages of non-BDSM practitioners for these characteristics. They

also found that contrary to popular belief, preference for BDSM is not associated with past sexual

abuse, psychopathology, or sexual difficulties (Richters, de Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith,

2008). Similarly, Wismeijer and Van Assenn (2013) found that relative to a control group of

non-BDSM practitioners, participants with BDSM experience in either the dominant or

submissive role were in slightly *better* psychological health.

      Those within the community suggest that inaccurate media portrayals are partially to

blame for perpetuating the stereotypes regarding BDSM practitioners (Anonymous, personal

communication, October, 2012; Barker et al., 2007). Films, books, and news casts sensationalize

atypical situations that are not accurate portrayals of SM practitioners in which characters

perpetrate violent crimes involving SM-like sexual undertones. Although mass media does have

an influential effect on the public, several underlying social constructs are primary contributors

to the stigmatization and discrimination felt by members of the BDSM community and are

discussed in the following sections.

      SM and Feminism. Many feminist groups are opposed to SM (and pornography)

because it perpetuates the ideals of the traditional, patriarchal society in which men are dominant

over women (Wright, 2006). However, this type of belief seems to be limited to a male-dominant,

female-submissive relationship. Ideally, in an egalitarian relationship, neither gender would

reign over the other. Feminist supporters of sadomasochism claim that for this reason, it should only be lesbians who practice SM (Rubin, 1981). Some from the post-colonial feminist camp liken SM to the male-dominated ritualistic practices of infliction of pain and body modification (e.g., genital mutilation, foot-binding, and *sati*) in non-Western countries (Deckha, 2011). Radical feminists view the practice of SM as misogynistic and anti-feminist, and that participation in dominant activities in any manner indicates an acceptance of the patriarchal dogma on which dominance and submission are based (Cross & Matheson, 2006). This view maintains that SM practitioners must, by extension, also hold anti-feminist attitudes, although this was not substantiated when tested by Cross and Matheson (2006): SM practitioners were found to hold relatively *pro*-feminist views, reflecting a pro-egalitarian attitude.

SM as Psychopathology. The majority of research conducted on sadomasochism is focused on SM as a form of psychopathology rather than on the phenomenology of the individuals themselves (Langdridge & Barker, 2007). A relatively broad spectrum of research has been conducted on discrimination and stigmatization of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans) and HIV-positive communities, however very little work has explored the BDSM community as another sexual minority group. Although similarities can be drawn between these marginalized groups, major differences are still quite apparent. As homosexuality was considered to be a mental disorder several decades ago, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-IV*; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000) still listed "Sexual Sadism" and "Sexual Masochism" as paraphilias, a category of sexual disorders that includes pedophilia, voyeurism, and exhibitionism, which are criminal offences (Department of Justice Canada, 2012). Although the diagnostic criteria specify that classification is satisfied in

cases that involve *non*-consensual acts, the stigma was of course, carried over into the consensual context.

Some researchers (Kleinplatz & Moser, 2007; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2005) suggested that the APA remove SM from the listed paraphilias in subsequent editions of the DSM, their claim being that sadism and masochism should not be classified as "pathological" and should be removed from the DSM because it is a consensual act. The distinction, however, is that the DSM-IV criteria for Sexual Sadism Disorder and Sexual Masochist Disorder specified that the act is *not* consensual (APA, 2000). Nonetheless, this classification as psychopathology extended into publicly held stereotypes and perpetuated the stigma experienced by many BDSM-ers, prompting DSM-V (APA, 2013) developers to note the distinction between behaviour – for example, playing rough – and actual pathology.

SM and Law. The primary concern surrounding SM and legal matters involves issues of violence. In the United Kingdom, the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 (United Kingdom Legislation, 2012) states, "Whosoever shall unlawfully and maliciously wound or inflict any grievous bodily harm upon any other person, either with or without any weapon or instrument, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor, and being convicted thereof shall be liable to be kept in penal servitude" (article 47). Possibly the most notable court case involving sadomasochism was that of R vs. Brown, also known as "The Spanner Case" (United Kingdom House of Lords Decisions, 1993), which involved a police raid of a private SM "play party", and subsequent arrest and conviction of several homosexual men. Although consent was given by the submissive parties, this nonetheless sparked the controversial issue of consent: Regardless of the 'assaulted' party's admission of consent, in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, the assault itself is worthy of a criminal charge and the perpetrator(s) may be sentenced to time in prison. Police

raids quite often resulted in the arrests of individuals practicing SM activities, because it is indeed "inflicting bodily harm", although it is entirely consensual (Weait, 2007). This also presents an issue of sexual privacy for many people: Many feel that what happens behind closed doors is of no one's concern but the individuals involved (Green, 2001).

Although sadomasochism in and of itself is not considered illegal, criminal charges have been placed on practitioners and others involved in the community for particular acts that fall under criminal jurisdiction (Weait, 2007). Legally speaking, SM is much like prostitution in that the actual act of *being* a prostitute—or in this case, *being* a BDSM practitioner—is not illegal, however the peripheral acts necessary to carry out prostitution (e.g., exchange of goods, or payment for services rendered) and BDSM (e.g., assault with or without a "deadly" weapon, which can be something as benign as a spanking with a wooden spoon) *are* illegal, and the individual can be taken to court for legal prosecution (Weait, 2007).

Discrimination from Helping Professionals. It is quite possible that because of the aforementioned derivations of anti-SM prejudice, those who are involved in the BDSM community are discriminated against by many groups and professionals. Like many other groups that are the target of intolerant aggression, SM-identified individuals experience passive and aggressive acts of discrimination that take the form of anything from rude comments, to refusal of treatment (in a medical or mental health setting), to monetary fines and business closures for proprietors who cater to the BDSM community (Weait, 2007; Wright, 2006). According to the 2008 Survey of Violence and Discrimination Against Sexual Minorities (Wright, 2008a), SM-ers reported that they were mostly discriminated against by medical doctors and mental health practitioners. Unfortunately, some of these helping professionals are unable to see beyond the "SM diagnosis" to treat their patients with the care and respect that they would give anyone else

outside the BDSM community. These patients seek out help for a variety of ailments unrelated to their SM activity, yet their practitioners refuse to treat them, or in some cases exploit them upon learning that they practice sadomasochism:

> My therapist (MSW) was totally flummoxed and astounded by both my bisexuality and the fact that I consider myself a switch. Once I told her about these things, she focused on them almost entirely, neglecting the issues at hand (I didn't have a problem with my bisexuality or my BDSM interactions at the time, they weren't causing any problems in my life/job/family...but my husband's severe alcoholism [did]). She decided she wanted to write a book on her patients' bisexual and BDSM lifestyles, and it got to a point where I couldn't believe I (and my insurance company) were actually paying her to do research for a book. I really needed the help with separating from my husband, learning to detach, learning to put my needs first, and not prurient interest from someone who was supposed to care. (Wright, 2008b, p. 2)

Most BDSM practitioners seek out "kink-friendly" healthcare professionals who are more accepting of their lifestyles to receive the care they need as well as avoid discrimination. However, professionals open to treating alternative sexuality (alt-sex) patients are rare (Anonymous, personal communication, November, 2012; Wright, 2008b).

Through personal communication with individuals (who prefer to remain anonymous), and participation in online BDSM community forums, it is apparent that the depth of compassion and acceptance of others within the community is profound. This community generously welcomes newcomers and seems to be genuinely driven to help promote BDSM acceptance and awareness through community education events and forums. Of course, disputes and disruptions

occur, as they do in any community, nonetheless there is an obvious sense of legitimate consideration for fellow BDSM-ers. These communications also reinforce understanding of the real-life distress felt by a great number of individuals stemming from the anxiety of "coming out", or "being outed", and the fear of subsequent discrimination by the public. Although some alt-sex education and awareness programs are in place (Sprott & Bienvenu, 2007), certainly more can be done to reduce the stigma felt by this population.

Similarly marginalized sexual minority groups (e.g., the transgender community) are evaluating ways in which social stigmatization can be ameliorated. In an evaluation of transphobia reduction using Intergroup Contact Theory (Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Pettigrew, 1998), Walch and colleagues (2012) found support for increased levels of "out-group" acceptance when the "in-group" was exposed to normative information about the out-group. The results indicated a significant decline in transphobia when a lecture about the transgender community was followed by a transgender speaker panel (Walch et al., 2012). This concept could easily be applied to social acceptance of the BDSM community: Exposure to normative information delivered by members of the BDSM community may increase levels of social acceptance of BDSM.

Based on the aforementioned research, the following two hypotheses were proposed regarding social acceptance of sadomasochism: Within a Dominant/submissive relationship, (1) women in a position of dominance would be evaluated as more socially acceptable than men in a position of dominance, while men in a position of submission would be evaluated as more socially acceptable than women in a position of submission, and (2) exposure to information that normalizes the relationship of a Dominant/submissive couple would increase evaluations of social acceptability for D/s behaviour as a variant of healthy, normative sexuality.

Method

Design

This study employed a 2 (gender of the Dominant) x 2 (interview with Dominant/submissive couple provided; no interview provided) x 2 (gender of the participant) multifactorial design. A Dominant/submissive discipline scene comprised of a vignette, a photo, and an interview with the D/s couple from the scene served as the stimuli in which the independent variables, (a) gender of the Dominant, and (b) presence of the interview, were manipulated. In 2 of the 4 conditions, the participants received a vignette and photo with a female Dominant and a male submissive. In the other 2 conditions, participants received a vignette and photo of a male Dominant and a female submissive. An interview with a D/s couple was also provided in 2 of the 4 conditions to create a total of 4 vignette conditions: (1) Female Dominant – vignette and photo only, (2) Female Dominant – interview with the couple, followed by the vignette and photo, (3) Male Dominant – vignette and photo only, and (4) Male Dominant – interview with the couple, followed by the vignette and photo.

The participants' levels of social acceptance were measured using two scales that served as the dependent variables: (a) the Attitudes toward Sadomasochism Scale (ASMS; Yost, 2010), and (b) a set of vignette assessment items developed by the researchers.

Participants

Participants included a convenience sample of 18- to 56-year-old undergraduate students ($N = 236$) recruited from the research participant pool of a large Western Canadian university. Participants were either compensated with bonus credit for an approved course or were entered a draw to win a gift card to a local bookstore. The mean age was 21.86 years old ($SD = 4.76$), and most were female (73%). The sample was quite culturally diverse, with over 25 languages

represented, although English was the primary language identified for most participants (54%).

Twenty four percent of participants reported that they had engaged in BDSM activity.

Materials and Measures

Social acceptance of sadomasochism and Dominant/submissive relationships was measured using the Attitudes About Sadomasochism Scale (ASMS; Yost, 2010) and a set of additional items generated by the researchers to assess participant opinions about the couple in the vignette specifically. A set of BDSM-related definitions preceded the questionnaires to provide participants with an adequate and consistent comprehension of the terms used throughout the questionnaire as well as a context within which to base their responses. The vignette package included (1) a D/s scene comprised of (a) a vignette describing a typical event in the couple's relationship, and (b) a gender-matched photo of a D/s couple, (2) an interview with a D/s couple, (3) the ASMS, (4) a set of vignette assessment items, and (5) a set of demographic items.

Dominant/submissive Scene. A complete Dominant/submissive discipline scenario was created by combining a short vignette with a gender-matched photo to provide participants with a tangible and consistent impression of this particular facet of BDSM-type activity. The vignettes and photos did not contain explicit "sex acts", however they did illustrate a strong dominant-submissive dynamic within the couple's relationship.

Vignettes. To accurately portray a realistic situation involving a BDSM relationship, two versions of a vignette were written by the researchers with the assistance of an SM-identified couple in a local BDSM community who engage in Dominant/submissive behaviour on a regular basis. The vignettes describe a heterosexual Dominant/submissive couple engaging in a scene involving mild D/s behaviour (psychological and physical discipline such as verbal scolding and

physical restraint). The vignette for each condition was identical except that the genders of the dominant and submissive characters were reversed in 2 of the 4 conditions. The purpose of the scene was to illustrate dominant and submissive qualities within a D/s relationship, to evaluate any gender differences in social acceptance (e.g., whether there exists a sexual double standard regarding a position of dominance or submission in a D/s relationship), and to provide participants with an accurate representation on which to base their opinions about BDSM as a variation of healthy sexuality.

Photos. A photo of an anonymous Dominant/submissive couple dressed in fetish wear accompanied each vignette and represented the couple described in the scene. The photos were publically sourced (Google, 2012) and depict a D/s scene in which the genders and roles of the two individuals are consistent with the vignette version given to the participant. The photos contained mild nudity, however they were not explicit, nor did they depict an overly graphic scene that may have otherwise been too extreme for some participants. The purpose of the photos was to provide the viewer with an image to consider when reading the vignettes, as well as to control for differences in subjective interpretation of the characters in the written subject matter. These particular photos were selected because they effectively illustrated the power-exchange dynamic between the two individuals: One partner was clearly dominant, while the other clearly submissive. The couples in both photos were attractive—as determined by independent evaluation by the research team—and similar in age to the participant sample. These factors, attractiveness and similarity, were intended to maximize positive affect toward the couple (Perloff, 2010).

Interview with a Dominant/submissive Couple. A written copy of an interview with the couple accompanied the vignette and photo in 2 of the 4 conditions and was intended to

provide information about the couple's day-to-day life, experiences, and opinions as an SM-identified couple. The questions posed in the interview were generated by the researchers, and the responses were provided by the same couple that assisted in the writing of the vignette. The interview was designed to employ several communicator source factors in persuasion such as likability, expertise, goodwill, and familiarity (Perloff, 2010) in order to maximize the interview's effectiveness in increasing social acceptance of the couple. Neither the vignette, photos, nor interview included information that could compromise the couple's anonymity in any way.

Attitudes About Sadomasochism Scale. The 23-item ASMS scale (Yost, 2010) is designed to measure prejudicial attitudes about sadomasochism and contains items based primarily on publically held stereotypes and radical feminist critiques about sadomasochism. Some items are adapted from items within other scales measuring topics such as right-wing authoritarianism, sexual conservatism, homophobia, rape myth acceptance, and social desirability (Yost, 2010). In order to evaluate several levels of attitudes about sadomasochism, the 23 items were categorized into four subscales: Socially Wrong (the belief that practicing SM is immoral and should be illegal), Violence (the belief that people who engage in SM, particularly dominants, are violent), Lack of Tolerance (the belief that SM is not acceptable as a sexual preference), and Real Life (the belief that SM interests carry over into other aspects of a person's life) (Yost, 2010). Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), where higher scores indicate greater acceptance of BDSM, and possible scores ranged from 23 to 161. Items phrased in a positive direction (e.g., "Sadomasochists are just like everybody else.") were reverse-scored to reflect negative attitudes

toward SM. Cronbach's alpha for the overall scale was .96, with each individual subscale category yielding an alpha of .78 or higher.

Vignette Assessment Items. Twenty-four items were designed that pertained to social acceptance of the behaviour specifically described in the vignette. These items evaluated the social acceptance of the Dominant/submissive lifestyle as variations of a healthy sexual relationship. Items unique to the vignette assessment portion of the questionnaire were phrased in a similar manner to those in the Attitudes About Sadomasochism Scale, and all responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale identical to that used in the ASMS questionnaire to ensure questionnaire consistency. Possible scores ranged from 24 to 168, where higher scores reflected greater acceptance of the couple's Dominant/submissive relationship. As with the ASMS, positively phrased items (e.g., "The individuals in the vignette love each other.") were reverse scored. Reliability testing of this scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .94, and as such, was consistent with the inter-item reliability of the ASMS.

Demographic Items. Demographic data was collected such as the participants' age, gender, and language spoken at home as an indicator of cultural influences/ethnicity. Participants were also asked whether they had ever engaged in BDSM activity and were provided with a caveat describing some of the activities considered to be BDSM-type practices.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four vignette package conditions: (1) Female Dominant vignette and photo only ($n = 62$), (2) Female Dominant interview with the couple, followed by the vignette and photo ($n = 57$), (3) Male Dominant vignette and photo only ($n = 61$), or (4) Male Dominant interview with the couple, followed by the vignette and photo ($n = 56$). All participants were administered their vignette package in an individual face-to-face

setting. Completion of the vignette package took between 30 and 40 minutes for most participants.

Results

Two separate 2 (gender of the Dominant) x 2 (interview provided, no interview provided) x 2 (participant gender) factorial ANOVAs, with the questionnaire scales of ASMS (attitudes about BDSM in general) and vignette assessment (attitudes about the couple described in the vignette) evaluated as separate dependent variables. In both scales, higher scores reflected a higher level of social acceptance of BDSM. Assumptions of normality and were met and there were no significant effects of outliers. Levene's tests (ASMS, $p = .11$; vignette assessment, $p = .18$), confirmed that the assumptions of equal variances had been met.

The first ANOVA using the ASMS as a dependent variable indicated no significant main effects of gender of the Dominant, $F(1, 227) = 1.86$, $p = .175$, interview presence, $F(1, 227) = 1.67$, $p = .197$, or participant gender, $F(1, 227) = 3.51$, $p = .062$, and no significant interaction effects (see Table 1).

The results of the second ANOVA with vignette assessment as the dependent variable indicated a significant two-way interaction effect for interview presence and participant gender, $F(1, 228) = 5.35$, $p < .05$; partial $\eta^2 = .02$. A follow-up simple effects analysis indicated that attitudes about BDSM for men and women were affected differently by the presence of the interview. Specifically, social acceptance of BDSM was similar for men and women when the interview was provided; however, acceptance of BDSM for women was significantly lower than for men when the interview was absent. That is, when provided with a normalizing interview with a Dominant/submissive couple, women were more accepting of BDSM. No other significant main or interaction effects were found (see Table 2).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to evaluate levels of social acceptance of BDSM as a healthy variation of sexuality when applied to a Dominant/submissive relationship. Our first hypotheses, that women in a position of dominance would be evaluated as more socially acceptable than men in a position of dominance, while men in a position of submission would be evaluated as more socially acceptable than women in a position of submission, was not supported. The results do however indicate partial support for our second hypotheses, in that women considered BDSM more acceptable when provided with normalizing information—in the form of an interview about a D/s couple's lifestyle—than when not provided with an interview, relative to men. The attitudes of men in this study remained relatively consistent regardless of the absence or presence of the interview. A possible explanation for this finding is that the normative, counter-stereotypical information about the Dominant/submissive couple in the interview made the otherwise "taboo" concept of BDSM less salient, and therefore more appealing to women, a finding consistent with the Intergroup Contact Theory (Pettigrew, 1998), and the results of Walch et al.'s (2012) findings that transphobia was reduced through similar out-group exposure. Furthermore, indirect exposure to out-groups (e.g., having a friend who is friends with an out-group member) has been shown to reduce levels of prejudice at comparable levels to direct exposure (e.g., having a friend yourself who is an out-group member) (Pettigrew, Christ, Wagner, & Stellmacher, 2007).

The findings of this study are contrary to what was expected, as well as those in the related literature (e.g., Walch et al., 2012). Our results could possibly be due to sampling biases stemming from the relatively low male-to-female participant ratio. The sample itself may have also posed an issue in that it was comprised of undergraduate university students from a suburban

community. As such, these results may not be generalizable to the public in metropolitan areas where a more diverse group of individual lifestyle differences is common. The mean age for this sample was 21.86 years of age, a young sample for this study's subject matter, considering that most individuals within the BDSM community are between 30-60 years old (Anonymous, personal communication, October, 2012). The age of the participants not only presents an issue of experience and attitudes regarding BDSM, it also presents a possible confound in that some participants may have had little or no experience with sexual activity in general, let alone "explorative" sexuality.

Nonetheless, the prevalence of BDSM history within this sample was an interesting result, as 24% of participants reported that they had engaged in BDSM activity: More than twice that of previously recorded rates (Kleinplatz & Moser, 2007; Reinisch, Beasley, & Kent, 1990). One possible explanation for this over-representation of students who had engaged in BDSM activity may be that general public awareness and acceptance of the BDSM community and the practices therein have increased over the last several years, especially since the popularization of the "*50 Shades of Grey*" book series (James, 2012). This generation of students has also been exposed to numerous messages in school and in the media advocating tolerance of individual differences and promoting anti-bullying, anti-discrimination attitudes that could have influenced response patterns. Perhaps there was a relatively high level of acceptance throughout the sample that may have homogenized the scores for each condition, producing a ceiling effect. Other factors affecting response patterns could have been that, given the emotionally-charged topic, some participants may have had pre-established attitudes regarding the BDSM lifestyle or practitioners themselves, which may have served as a baseline level of social acceptance. If these participants joined the study with relatively polarized, unwavering opinions about BDSM,

especially given that a sizable minority engaged in the activity themselves, it may have produced response biases consistent with these attitudes, regardless of the vignette condition to which they were assigned.

Although the results of the study only partially supported our hypotheses, this study may prove to be relevant to the ever-growing body of research conducted on the BDSM community, and the individuals therein, in a consensual context, possibly providing some groundwork for future research that may one day be the basis of practical applications such as anti-BDSM-discrimination, BDSM education programs, and initiatives to facilitate increased social acceptance of the BDSM community. Many individuals within the BDSM community support the idea of educational initiatives and workshops aimed at providing the public with accurate information about BDSM to debunk commonly held stereotypes (Anonymous, personal communication, September, 2012). These findings lend further credence to the development of an information- and education-based anti-discrimination program available to the public.

Limitations and Future Research

Future studies may find more robust results following the improvement of this study's limitations. As mentioned, the suburban population of university students used was not ideal as it may not generalize to the greater public. Large urban cities tend to include a more diverse group of individuals ranging in age, sexual orientation, sexual knowledge, and experience. It is common for individuals to discover the BDSM lifestyle later in life when they are more comfortable with their sexuality (Anonymous, personal communication, September, 2012). Therefore, younger individuals, such as those used as participants here, may not be as accepting of BDSM as would a sample of individuals ranging in age across the lifespan.

The vignettes and interview were originally intended to be videotaped scenes and interviews with genuine BDSM practitioners, however given that individuals within the local BDSM community were reluctant to participate in the study as "performers" in the scene and interview out of fear of exposure, it was not possible to create video versions of the independent variables. Higher levels of emotional reactivity to the information in the interview and Dominant/submissive scene may have been achieved had the scene and interview been presented to participants as videos, or live scenes, yielding a more significant effect size. For the ethical reasons regarding privacy mentioned above, it was not possible to produce photos of the actual D/s couple that assisted in the creation of the vignette and interview, thus publically sourced photos of anonymous couples were used. Ideally, the photos of the D/s couples would have included the same two individuals in both conditions, posed in an identical manner to control for confounds related to the content of the photos. The difference in context between the two photos used may have accounted for some of the variance seen in the results; for example, the male Dominant was standing beside his submissive, while the female Dominant was seated on her submissive's back as he was on 'all fours', which to some may have been a more offensive juxtaposition of roles.

Future research should evaluate gender differences in the comparison of social acceptance levels reported for same-sex D/s couples and those reported for heterosexual D/s couples. With the gender of the individuals in the relationship kept constant, personality, or gender-role related factors may be more apparent; by removing gender as a factor, social acceptance of the roles within a D/s relationship may be more clearly evaluated.

Anecdotal evidence suggests a higher-than-average level of education within the BDSM community, which was supported in a qualitative survey sample of BDSM-identified

individuals: 85% of respondents were college educated, 30% of whom had graduate degrees (Bezreh et al., 2012). The 2009 demographics for education attainment in Massachusetts, the state in which the qualitative study was conducted, reported that 38.2% of the population had earned a college degree, and 16.4% had earned a graduate degree, the second highest levels reported in the country that year (US Census Bureau, 2012). The results of this study indicated that education levels among those in the BDSM community were significantly higher than the general population. These results were also 25% higher than the Canadian national average (60% of the population) for post-secondary education in 2006, according to Statistics Canada (Government of Canada, 2001). Future studies might examine possible correlates between education levels—or IQ scores—and likelihood to engage in 'deviant' sexual behaviour, specifically Dominant/submissive role play. As D/s role play involves a significantly psychological component, individuals who enjoy heightened intellectual stimulation may be more inclined to incorporate D/s into their sexual repertoire.

Conclusion

This study was the first, to our knowledge, to examine two constructs within a Dominant/submissive relationship: (a) gender as a factor of social acceptance, and (b) exposure to normative information as a method of increasing levels of social acceptance. Public policy makers may initiate anti-discrimination programs to ameliorate the negativity experienced by the BDSM community and may consider the use of normative information about BDSM practitioners delivered by members of the BDSM community to reduce the stigma felt by SM-identified individuals. This may educate the public about the intellectual or emotional components of a D/s relationship, debunking stereotypes insinuating that BDSM is primarily about pain, and that sadomasochists enjoy hurting others and being hurt. As most dominants are

men (Anonymous, personal communication, October, 2012), another focus could be to reduce the effects of the (reverse) sexual double standard to improve opinions of male dominants, and by extension, BDSM. Although the results of this study provide some insight into the under-researched area of sadomasochism, a more robust body of research is necessary to fully understand this complex facet of human sexuality, and the individuals therein.

Tables

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Participant Scores on the Attitudes About Sadomasochism Scale

Participant Gender	Gender of Dominant	Interview Provided	*M*	*SD*	*n*
Male	Female	No	118.13	18.84	15
		Yes	106.56	23.17	18
	Male	No	105.12	22.29	16
		Yes	110.60	27.79	15
Female	Female	No	95.77	29.77	47
		Yes	112.72	30.05	39
	Male	No	94.91	33.75	45
		Yes	103.41	28.91	41

Note. Score range = 23-161; higher scores indicate greater acceptance of BDSM.

Table 2

Means and Standard Errors for Participant Scores on BDSM Attitudes in Vignettes

Participant Gender	Interview Provided	*M*	*SE*	95% CI	
				Lower	*Upper*
Male	No	109.77	4.89	100.14	119.41
	Yes	102.94	4.74	93.60	112.28
Female	No	93.39*	2.84	87.80	98.98
	Yes	105.30	3.04	99.30	111.30

Note. Score range = 24-168; higher scores indicate greater acceptance of BDSM.
*$p < .01$.

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