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# The Perpetuation and Subversion of Gender-Power Dynamics in BDSM: An Interview Study in Central Pennsylvania

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# The Perpetuation and Subversion of Gender-Power

# Dynamics in BDSM

## An Interview Study in Central Pennsylvania

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BDSM is a sexual practice, lifestyle, and community that is becoming increasingly known to mainstream culture because of its presence in popular media (Lenius).[1] BDSM is an acronym that stands for bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, and sadism/masochism. The practice of SM refers to "a variety of sexual behaviors that have an implicit or explicit power differential as a significant aspect of the erotic interaction" (Moser and Kleinplatz 35). The "sexual behaviors" include a range of practices including but not limited to humiliation, degradation, spanking, role-play, mind control, and bondage (Tomassilli et al. 438). Participants engage in a wide range of behaviors, some strictly adhering to a specific few while others are flexible in their choice of SM activity (Richters 1661).

SM has been the target of much debate in the feminist community because it involves the performance of unequal power dynamics and uses the administration of pain (Linden 3; Russell 178). Anti-SM camps have interpreted this as abusive, harmful, and perpetuating the subjugation of women- especially if a woman takes on the role of submissive and submits to a man in the dominant role (Russell 177-178; Bar On 75). On the other side, SMers and feminists alike have described SM as subversive to normative sexuality and gender norms, and empowering to women because it parodies traditional sexual dynamics and roles are actively chosen (Taylor and Ussher 302; Ritchie and Barker 237). Misunderstandings and misrepresentations of SM permeate popular culture, and continue to enter into feminist discourses (Ritchie and Barker

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[1] This is evident with the release of the best-selling novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*, in which the main character is portrayed as practicing BDSM heavily.

229).[2]  Convincing points lay on both sides of the debate.  The present study was designed to examine how SM subverts and perpetuates gender norms of the dominant culture through a community study of the Central Pennsylvania community.  I am interested in whether or not SM actually perpetuates patriarchal values.

Sexuality has been regulated and policed by myriad institutions in Western cultures since the emergence of structured civilization.  Laws have literally policed sexual desires through the illegalization of certain sex acts.  For example, until more recently anal sex, termed "sodomy," was legally prohibited in much of Europe and the United States; its prohibition continues to exist in some states today (Rosario 20).  Gayle Rubin, writing in 1984, describes popular sexual ideology as being based on a hierarchical value system, "the charmed circle", depicting some sex acts thought of as "good" (e.g. monogamous, procreative, vanilla, coupled, heterosexual) and their opposites as "bad" (promiscuous, non-procreative, SM, alone or in groups, homosexual) ("Thinking Sex" 12-13).  Rubin points out that engaging in sexual behaviors that are considered "bad," comes with a number of manifestations of the social stigma, including

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[2] For example: Some feminist discourses assume men are far more often dominants and women are far more often submissives, when some studies men and women identify with dominant-spectrum and submissive-spectrum identities fairly equally, as well as with the role of switch (Breslow, Evans, and Langley 312). In Megan Yost's sample of 126 men and 138 women in the U.S., most women identified on the submissive spectrum (59%) and men identified fairly equally among the dominant and submissive spectrums and switch identity (38%,33%, and 29%, respectively) (141).  Staci Newmahr's small sample of 18 individuals from a major metropolitan area in the U.S. found a similar trend, except more men were switches than the other two categories (43). In Yost and Hunter's study on SM individuals in the U.S., from a sample of 144 women and 128 men, more women identified as submissive spectrum and more men as dominant spectrum, but they identified equally as switches (247, 249).  A study on 24/7 slavery found that most participants, all self-identified slaves (66 males and 80 females), had male owners (Dancer, Kleinplatz, and Moser 85).  All of these samples were predominantly white and well educated.  These gender-role variances vaguely follow traditional gender roles, but in no case is it overwhelmingly congruent.  That men and women tend to identify equally with the role of switch is interesting, and I think indicates more freedom of role choice than in dominant norms not only because it is an option that simultaneously follows and defies norms, but also it is an identity that allows flux.

presumption of mental illness, criminality, loss of institutional support and economic

sanctions (12).  Sadomasochism and fetishism, both prevalent in SM, are "quite firmly

entrenched as psychological malfunctions" (12).

Popular medical discourses pathologized the sexual practices of sadism and

masochism in turn of the century Europe (Moore 144-145).  Psychoanalytic and

psychiatric texts brought the terms "sadism" and "masochism" into the cultural

imagination, associating them with medical discourse and pathology from the start.

The first use of these terms is granted to Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his *Psychopathia*

*Sexualis* (Moore 140)*.*  Sadism and masochism, as well as fetishism, remain

pathologized, as demonstrated by their inclusion in the most recent version of the

*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders*, or the *DSM-V*  ("U 04 Sexual

Masochism").  There is a struggle to remove these terms from the DSM, led by the

National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, and much academic literature has worked to

debunk the idea of SM as mental illness ("DSM-V Revision Project"[3]).  Revised

definitions for the new version of the DSM emphasize that not all paraphilia are mental

disorders, but the terms will not be removed ("DSM-V Revision Project").  Cross and

Matheson point out that mainstream psychiatric literature as recent as the mid 1990s

associated sadomasochism with rape and murder (135).  Yet, their empirical study

examining attitudes towards SM found that, "None of the prevailing academic

perspectives on SM explored in the present investigation was supported by the data,"

indicating that prevailing academic perspectives were based on social stigma rather

than lived experiences (147).

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[3] See also Beckmann, and Langdridge and Barker *Safe, Sane and Consensual*

It was in such texts at *Psychopathia Sexualis* that sadism and masochism were

constructed as pathologically gendered: they were thought as perverse because they

either transgressed gender roles (the role of male masochist and female sadist) or they

exaggerated them too much (female masochist and male sadist) (139, 142).

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe, masochism, as long as it was not

excessive, along with submission to a man was perceived as inherent to female

sexuality (Moore 151). Male sadism, if not excessive, was also understood as inherent

to male sexuality (Moore 151). Freud, in his well-known *Three Essays on the Theory of

Sexuality,* equates sadism with masculinity and activity, and masochism with femininity

and passivity (160). The assumed naturalness of female submissiveness and male

dominance remains prevalent in gender norms of the dominant culture today (Parent

and Moradi 959; Mahalik 9).

In light of the regulation of sexual desire, people formed communities centered

on certain desires to create safe spaces and solidarity among individuals with non-

normative or otherwise transgressive desires. This includes the formation of LGBT

communities as well as leather-SM communities (D'Emilio 470). Like any culture, the

SM subculture has created its own language to describe concepts specific to its

community. See Appendix A for a list of terms I will use throughout this paper and their

definitions.

SM has an ideological history based in hegemonic discourses, as Rubin and

others explained, so it must re-examined and deconstructed to offer a comprehensive

analysis. It is too easy to fall into the dominant discourses on SM and dismiss the

practice as "abusive," "unstable," or "wrong." Maneesha Deckha argues for a new

conception of the feminist potential of SM by applying a postcolonial feminist approach

to understanding it. One of her main points is that "SM is a particular cultural practice

and feminists should regard it as postcolonial feminists do other practice in different

subcultural contexts" (142). She uses the example that feminists tend to err on the side

of affirming women's "complicated choices" when debating non-Western cultural

practices, such as female excision (131). Moreover, she argues that criticizing certain

practices as the "sexual Other," as SM often is, reproduces cultural hegemony, a concept

feminism would like to see deconstructed and demolished (142).

People in the SM community as well as some researchers have considered SM

communities subversive to normative sexuality (Taylor and Ussher 302; Barale 87-88;

Langdridge and Butt 44). Some SMers understand it as deliberately antithetical to

sexual hegemonic structures and others as a celebration of sexual difference, in

opposition to the dominant sexual discourse (Taylor and Ussher 303). SM play is

clearly transgressive[4][5] of normative sexual dynamics because of its focus on the whole

body, explicit negotiation, heavy use of props, and the involvement of pain and

humiliation (Sisson 28; Moser and Kleinplatz 38, 48). As McClintock elucidates,

dominant ideas of sexual acts, orientated on the arousal and stimulation of genitals, are

in contrast to SM because it utilizes non-genital, non-erogenous spaces on the body for

sexual arousal" (106). Transgression can challenge, or subvert, hegemonic norms: it

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[4] In this paper, I use transgress and transgressive to mean "to go beyond [or outside] the limits" of ("transgress"). To transgress gender roles is to embody or perform a gender role in a way it is not stereotypically embodied or performed. I make a distinction between "transgression" and "subversion" to keep from making the leap that to transgress something is to necessarily subvert it-one may transgress something without necessarily subverting it.

[5] In this paper, I use subvert and subversion to mean "to undermine the principles of" ("subvert"). To subvert gender norms is to disrupt them or undermine them to the point of creating change or creating a space for change.

sets a model for acting outside the norm and allows the transgressor to experience a non-normative role. That is, when transgression is deliberately antithetical to hegemony or a celebration of difference, it has the potential for subversion (Taylor and Ussher 303). SM communities, by engaging in practices with many aspects that are transgressive of dominant ideas of sexuality and celebrating them, have great potential to subvert normative conceptions of sexuality and power.

SMers have also described the community as a safe space to explore gender (Bauer, "Playgrounds"179). Robin Bauer describes role-play as the most common vehicle for the exploration of gender by SM practitioners, but role tropes may be embodied differently depending on the SM subculture in which they are performed ("Transgressive" 235). SM has numerous tropes used as plotlines for scenes that are based on power dynamics of everyday relationships. A few examples include the Daddy/girl dynamic, Mommy/son or daughter, teacher/student (and similarly, any other authority figure/subject), incest play, and rape ("consensual nonconsent") play. These tropes are reflective of gender hegemony, but they do not necessarily have to be embodied by the implied gender in SM practices. The choice exists to embody the "opposite" role, and it is not uncommon for this to occur; thus the practice is sometimes transgressive (e.g. Taylor and Ussher 303). If one chooses to embody a traditional role, it still has the potential to be subversive because the dynamics are consciously and intentionally acted out and are agreed on by all participants, unlike everyday relationships where power dynamics are often implicit rather than explicit (Ritchie and Barker 303; Langdridge and Butt 46).

An analysis of the gay male leather community- a community which engages in

SM sex and can be understood as a subset of BDSM with distinct cultural symbols-demonstrates how gay leathermen are able to transgress normative gender roles (Mosher, Levitt, and Manley 114). By using gendered signs of the leather community, mostly white gay men were able to transform into the masculine man they could not be in dominant culture (114). Hegemonic gender roles remain exclusive to heterosexual men, but gay men were able to subvert their prescriptive roles by reclaiming masculinity in the leather subculture (97). Further transgression lays in the fact that leathermen identities exist in the roles of top and bottom. Leathermen can be masculine and dominant or masculine and submissive, which is counter to hegemonic discourse.

Similarly, Bauer's interviewees described the dyke+ SM community as being especially open to "genderfucking" the patriarchal heteronormative narratives ("Playgrounds" 181-183). Queer communities are generally more conscious of gender than heterosexual communities. Because one has to identify their self as different from the normative heterosexual identity when identifying as queer, one is often forced to consciously think about what gender they prefer romantically and/or sexually. Moreover, since normative gender categories assume heterosexuality, queer people are also made to think about the construction of their own gender identity (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 17). Thus, identifying as queer inherently requires one to think about gender. In lesbian communities, two identities often constructed are the "butch" and "femme" identities (Walker 90-91). An outsider may see the common relationship dynamic of a "butch" and "femme" lesbian as conforming to traditional gender dynamics, but these are stereotypes that often erase the gender fluidity within these identities (92).

However, because of the heightened level of gender consciousness in queer

communities, individuals in queer SM relationships more readily play with gender, thus

challenging the hegemonic gender structures.  Non-normative genders are represented

much more in SM communities like the dyke+ communities, whereas straight and

pansexual SM communities tend to have a small representation of non-normative

genders.  The presence of non-normative genders leads to more readily and frequently

queering gender dynamics in play.

In general, SM is often imagined as fantasy, in opposition to reality.  Megan Yost,

in regards to her study on the sexual fantasies of SM practitioners, argues that

"fantasies serve to contextualize the S/M activities" (137).  Similarly, Margot Weiss,

Anne McClintock, and others have described SM as performative, and that it should be

analyzed as such (6; 89).  SMers perform social power dynamics, thus situating them as

"scripted" and "subject to change" (McClintock 89).  Contextualizing SM as fantasy

means that practitioners conceive of SM activities as a *simulation* of power dynamics

and tropes, not an actual enactment of them (Yost 137).  In Ritchie and Barker's in-

depth focus group discussion study with SM-identified women, SM was often described

as distinct from reality (234).  Moreover, some of their participants described this

distinction as rationale for submission being reconcilable with a feminist identity (234).

SMers can imagine a vast range of choices of roles and dynamics to incorporate into

their practice because of the fantastical context of SM.  Positioning SM as fantasy frees it

from the same expectations as "reality," or at least provides an important contextual

distinction.  Nonetheless, as the feminist motto goes, "the personal is political": personal

practices have political meaning and, further, fantasy is limited by what is imaginable,

often via language, which is imbued with cultural meaning, and is shaped by culture. Positioning SM as theatrical allows for a reading of it as exaggerative and parodical of gender roles. Thomas Weinberg theorized that the theatrical framework of SM allows to participants to see it as "not the 'real thing'" and to understand that they have control over many elements of the scene (290). Patrick Hopkins said that gender and sexual identities are "made to seem less natural, less definite, less compulsory" when they are exposed by their embodiment and performance in an SM scene, thus giving SM great potential to subvert gender and sexual hegemony (136). Because of the framework of fantasy and performance, and the choice to embody a non-normative role, SM communities, regardless of dominant sexual orientation, exist in a context that creates the potential for gender subversion. As a feminist and invested member of the SM community, I examine whether or not SM successfully subverts hegemonic conceptions of gender, sexuality, and power.

Many others have been concerned with similar questions about the congruity of feminism and SM (Ritchie and Barker 228; Taylor and Ussher 302-303; Linden *Against Sadomasochism*). This is most explicitly addressed in the feminist sex wars of the 1970s, during which anti-SM feminists stigmatized SM as being abusive and for perpetuating patriarchal dynamics, thus as anti-feminist (Russell 177-178; Bar On 75). The "feminist sex wars" is the name given to the period in the late 1970s/early 1980s when heated debate arose among mainly U.S. feminists on topics regarding women's sexuality, particularly pornography and SM (Vance xxiii). They are called the "sex wars" because the discussions revealed two main opposing groups of thought among feminists – those who "believed women could claim sexual pleasure and agency in a

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patriarchal society" and those who believed doing so "constituted violence against women and submission to patriarchal ideals," such as the anti-porn and anti-SM feminists (Basiliere 1).

SM, like any identity, is not ahistorical or a-cultural.  It is imagined in relation to the "national" community- or the dominant discourse of SM that is believed to connect all SM communities- as well as histories of SM subcultures.  Because of this, it must be analyzed in context.  Anti-SM feminists have argued that SM, in its reflection and replication of traditional gender-power dynamics, perpetuates gender norms without subverting or challenging them (Bar On 80[6]).  SM is described as "enacting" patriarchal power dynamics (Bar On 78).  Enacting patriarchal power dynamics in the context of SM has different meanings and implications than enacting them outside of the subculture.

Margot Weiss makes a complex argument supporting notions that normative gender roles are perpetuated in SM.  She argues that SM performances work within social norms rather than creating a space of freedom from them (6).  She makes this argument when writing about her research that examines the Bay Area SM community through a social analysis of its racialized, gendered, and capitalist dynamics (6).  The crux of her argument is that SM performances would look very different if they did not exist within a racist, capitalist, patriarchal society; the performances are inextricable from cultural hierarchies and in fact, reproduce such social relations (18; 33).  Her claims lend support to the notion that SM perpetuates normative dynamics, although she frames her argument in a rejection of reading "SM on a formal dichotomy between

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[6] Also: Russell 178.

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transgression[7] and reification of social hierarchies," indicating that SM has the potential subvert and perpetuate hegemony simultaneously (24). Within this framework, her reasoning does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that harmful power dynamics of Western culture are perpetuated by SM—but she does conclude that they are *reproduced*. Reproducing (replaying, reenacting) hegemonic power dynamics in the context of SM play does not necessarily perpetuate hegemony. Reproducing norms may perpetuate or subvert hegemony. For example, José Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification as a way of dealing with dominant ideology explains disidentification as something that "transform[s] a cultural logic from within" by using symbols and discourse of dominant ideology and "invest[ing] [them] with new life" (11-12). SM play often replays norms- using tropes and other symbols from dominant ideology- but SMers invests them with "new life" by taking norms out of the context in which they exist in hegemony, consciously and consensually manipulating and performing them for their shared pleasure. I argue that replaying norms does not necessarily perpetuate them; context matters, and something more is needed to lead one to conclude that replication actually reinforces hegemony.

Gayle Rubin would have agreed that SMers are just "as likely to exhibit sexist attitudes or behavior," since they still exist in a sexist culture (Rubin, "Thinking Sex" 28). However, the subculture of SM has expectations and guidelines that differ from those of dominant society, so these attitudes and behaviors cannot be interpreted the same way. For example, because of the imperative of consent, behaviors that would otherwise be abusive such as spanking or verbal degradation can be experienced as

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[7] It is my understanding that Weiss is using transgression to mean subversion here.

pleasurable within the context of SM.  The significance of consent can also be seen in

discussions of rape and sexual assault: sexual activity becomes sexual assault when

there is a lack of consent.  SM at times may work within social norms; however, as many

have argued, its contextual particularities expose patriarchal hierarchies and even

parody them (Taylor and Ussher 303).  Many of Taylor and Ussher's participants

understand their SM sexuality as a form of dissidence to the dominant culture, being

consciously in opposition to hegemonic sexuality, and, furthermore understand it

through a feminist discourse (302).  They understood the power relations in their

practice to be reflexive rather than in favor of men, while also acknowledging that

unequal power exists in all sexual relationships (302).  Many also express the view that

their SM practices, especially when they reflect norms of the dominant culture, function

as a parody of abusive sexual relations, ridiculing and undermining "normal sex" with

the "ultimate intention of destroying it" (303).  SM practitioners, who consciously use

such tropes for pleasure, exploit traditionally oppressive relations for their own use

(303).  Traditional power dynamics are undermined because all participants control

them and, moreover, the traditional gender roles can be inverted or otherwise confused

(303).

     SM is practiced in a context centered on consent, communication, and

negotiation (Taylor and Ussher 297).  It is expected that all scenes and relationships be

negotiated beforehand, thus every participant actively chooses what they want in a

scene or relationship.  The act of negotiating not only allows but also requires

individuals involved to articulate their desires and boundaries (298).  It also facilitates

the intention of everyone having a safe and pleasurable experience.  The presence and

emphasis on consent and communication is used to not only distinguish SM from abuse, but to enable a context of transgression (Taylor and Ussher 302; Bauer, "Transgressive" 302). Open communication and negotiation creates a space for individuals to explore and push their own boundaries (Bauer, "Transgressive" 302).

Nevertheless, some feminists argue that the consent is not enough to subvert "heterosexual power dynamics" (Butler, "Lesbian S&M" 172). Particularly, they argue that women who desire to submit have a 'false consciousness' of freely choosing that position, only doing so because of internalized hatred- misogynistic or homophobic (Russell 176). However, Ritchie and Barker provide a sensible refutation, illuminating the fact that anti-SM feminist arguments often ignore and discount much of the reality of SM (Ritchie and Barker 233). It is not uncommon for a woman to have multiple SM relationships in which she assumes different roles (233). For example, a woman may participate in one relationship in which she is submissive to a man, and one in which she dominates a man. Furthermore, the anti-SM argument does not account for women who position themselves in the dominant role; and ignores non-heteronormative SM relationships. My argument, based on my understanding of the literature, my experience, and analysis of participants statements, falls into the pro-SM group that believes women can "claim sexual pleasure and agency in a patriarchal society" (Basiliere 1). It addresses the same issue with a new perspective, considering SM within the context of a non-urban community (a point I expand upon below) and considering how my interviewees thought about their SM practice and identity.

There are many critiques of lesbian SM, as well. This is significant because much of the feminist movement, and particularly the "sex war" debates, happened in lesbian

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communities.  Exemplifying this point is the fact that "lesbian history" as a field of study only became possible after feminism emerged and reconceived the category of woman as existing outside of relationships with men (Laurie 349).  Moreover, one of the first feminist groups to endorse SM was the lesbian feminist SM group Samois (Langdridge and Butt 35).  Russell echoes the sentiment of many anti-SM feminists when she describes lesbian SM as a result of internalized homophobia in that it inscribes heteronormative power dynamics onto same-gender relationships (176, 179).  This is a similar argument used in critique of butch/femme relationships (Stafford 85).

Patrick Califia provides an argument in opposition to that sentiment, stating that SM challenges the prescription that feminist lesbians should be having "gentle and loving" sex, while Russell's argument perpetuates such prescriptions (Califia 172).  Following Califia's reasoning, SM provides an alternative to stereotypes of both heterosexual and queer sexual behavior.  Teresa Hornsby constructs an interesting argument using several theoretical frameworks to demonstrate that lesbian SM is not antithetical to feminism; moreover, it subverts hegemonic power (61).  Using Judith Butler's theory about gender-role reversal[8], Hornsby describes how the SM lesbian's body subverts hegemonic gender when it inhabits the "role of male oppressor" because it is recognized as different from the body of the male oppressor and views this body as a "medium that must be destroyed" (69; Butler, *Gender Trouble* 130).  Hornsby also says that this subversive potential is absent in heterosexual and gay male SM relationships because their bodies are not distinct enough from the reality of the "male oppressor"

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[8] Butler describes gender role reversal as a possible site of subversion of normative gender roles. She says that assumptions about the sexes are expressed first through gender and then sexuality, so embodying the gender roles opposite of what is expected from the sex of one's body complicates and questions these assumptions (*Gender Trouble* 29).

(70).

Another feminist argument against SM is that because power and sexuality are historically tied to patriarchy, sexual acts will perpetuate patriarchy as long as they include the roles of "dominator and dominated" (Barale 82). Others would respond that the emphasis on choice and consent makes SM subversive (234). Where in hegemony normative gender roles are compulsory[9], in SM normative gender roles can be played with and subverted at the will of its participants. This is largely due to the imperative of negotiation in SM relationships and scenes. Participants consciously embody gendered scripts and use them to fulfill their desires (Bauer, "Playgrounds" 179). Many practitioners have expressed that one consciously chooses and constructs their identity (or identities) within the context of SM, and that the choice in and of itself is powerful (Bauer, "Transgressive" 234; Taylor and Ussher 302-303; Ritchie and Barker 230).

Bauer's interviewees claim that SM engages with power dynamics in "the construction of a social space that is experienced as a safe space" ("Playgrounds" 233). This claim can apply to SM more generally. The central mottos of the SM community, well known in any SM community, are "Safe, sane, and consensual" and "RACK", or Risk Aware Consensual Kink[10] (Bauer, "Transgressive" 234). These slogans exemplify the importance the SM community places on practices of negotiation, communication, and consent in order to ensure that all activity is safe and to facilitate a pleasurable experience. These general guidelines of the SM community help to create a "safe space." Individuals enter SM communities knowing that every person claims a non-normative

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[9] Non-SMers can certainly consciously play with gender as well. I argue that SM fosters an environment for this to take place, unlike dominant culture.

[10] I know this to be a motto through my observations of the various PA communities and discussions on kinky social networking sites.

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identity.  Another motto purports that, "Your kink is not my kink, but your kink is ok,"

further emphasizing the importance and expectation of accepting all dynamics and

desires.  In effort to address identities and practices not specified or fully captured by

the acronym of BDSM, some people refer to their identity and practices as, "What it is

that we do" (WIITWD) (Moser and Kleinplatz 35).  Again, this more inclusive term

makes clear that SM communities consciously aim to be open, accepting, and non-

restrictive.

SM is imbued with politics of sexuality because of its sexual nature and the

history of sex-policing.  Sexuality is tied to ideas of citizenship –in the concept of sexual

citizenship, counting only certain sexualities as qualification for full citizenry – and

other institutions, and such discourse is applied to SM[11] (Langdridge and Butt).  For

example, Rubin's "charmed circle" outlines certain acts as "in", so those who perform

them receive social benefits, and others, including SM behaviors, as "out", whose

practitioners receive social stigma ("Thinking Sex" 12).  A person can only receive the

full benefits and rights of citizenry if they engage in certain sexual acts.  In assessing

whether or not SM is a feminist act, it is important to try to avoid reinscribing other

harmful power dynamics, such as the denial of rights based on sexual practice.

Any adequate feminist analysis of SM and its gender politics must acknowledge

and incorporate the intersectionality that exists with SM identities.  SM practitioners

are never identified solely by their sexual practice; rather, they inhabit racialized,

gendered bodies and are likely to claim numerous other identities that influence the

meaning and context of their SM practice and identity.  For example, a black submissive

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[11] See also: Weiss, Margot D. "Gay Shame and BDSM Pride: Neoliberalism, Privacy, and Sexual
Politics." Radical History Review.100 (2008): 86-101. Print.

woman's experience has different meanings than a white submissive woman's not only because they are distinct individuals, but also because of the historical understandings of power cultural writes onto their bodies and how they understand themselves to be interacting with that.

**The Present Study**

Because SM dynamics and their meaning cannot be generalized across subcultures, in this study I focus on the iterations in the Central Pennsylvania SM community. When considering if and how SM perpetuates oppressive hegemonic structures, it is important to acknowledge that SMers are oppressed themselves, which I acknowledge and point to in the opening discussion of the oppression of sexuality and pathologization of SM, as well as other places (Califia 174). Acknowledging this contextualizes SMers experiences in a marginalized community, identity, and practice. Nevertheless, "everyone is implicated in reproducing or challenging" norms of the dominant culture (Stafford 81).

I attempted to gain insight to a few questions embedded within the history of the SM and feminist movements – whether or not SM is feminist; if and how it perpetuates patriarchy – through an interview study. My main research questions were: Do SM acts perpetuate or subvert gender-based inequality and oppression? How do gender roles in SM perpetuate and/or defy normative gender roles? How do gender roles interact with the power dynamics expressed in SM?

All of these questions have been addressed in previous literature such as those I have reviewed, if only briefly touched upon. For example, Ritchie and Barker, in a larger project on female sexuality, conducted a focus group discussion on feminism and

SM led by a group of women SMers in the UK, mostly from London (Ritchie).  They found that their participants "privileged the notion of choice in their understanding of feminism and SM" (236), and asserted SM's real potential to expose and subvert hegemonic power imbalances (236), which lay in part in it being situated as fantasy (237).  In Taylor and Ussher's interview study of 24 SMers from London, Brighton, and Amsterdam, most participants understood SM to be intentionally antithetical to patriarchal sexuality, and, drawing on feminist discourse, it was most often female participants that expressed this (302-303).  In addition, Robin Bauer, studying the dyke+ SM community in the USA and Western Europe, found that such communities create a safe space to explore genders, which allows for "an expansion of gender concepts and identities" as well as the "valuing of gender diversity" ("Playgrounds" 177, 191).  He also found that the body is "perceived as more performative than in mainstream culture" and theorized that the exploration and transgression of socially hierarchical roles such as gender within the community was largely due to members' lack of straight privilege ("Transgressive" 247-248).  In an ethnographic study the San Francisco Bay Area SM community, Margot Weiss concluded that SM performances work within "racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies" (6), reproducing such hierarchies while repudiating them through the construction of SM as fantasy (17).  Further, Cross and Matheson assessed questionnaire responses given by SMers from numerous countries to test prevailing academic views of SM and analyzed online SM encounters. They found that SMers endorsed feminist values, such as transcending restrictive gender roles, to the same extent as non-SMers, and even scored slightly higher in pro-feminist attitudes; Cross and Matheson say that this rejects radical feminists'

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assessment of SM as a community that accepts patriarchal values (145-146). However, this seems to imply the SM community is only no more sexist than the dominant culture, as Gayle Rubin speculated, which largely adheres to patriarchal values ("Thinking Sex" 28).

On the other hand, Linden et al.'s compilation of essays in *Against Sadomasochism* includes a number of feminists theorizing about the congruence of SM with feminism, mostly in their consideration of whether or not the power dynamics involved are indeed re-productive of patriarchal power. While none of these were empirical studies, they provided thoughtful consideration of the theoretical grounding for the sex war debates on sadomasochistic practices. Similarly, Patrick Califia provides many thoughtful reflections on the power and gender dynamics in SM in his book of essays, *Public Sex,* grounded in his experience in lesbian SM (when he was a lesbian; he has since transitioned). Califia emphasizes the ability to change roles, the lack of privilege assigned to roles based on "race, gender, and social class" in SM, and the importance of one's sexuality not being repressed (169, 174).

Despite the attention paid to research questions similar to mine in the preceding studies, no previous studies have asked these questions in the context of a non-urban community. This is a serious limitation, because although SM communities all share common practices, desires, and identities, they cannot be generalized into a conception of one SM community. The subculture of SM manifests differently depending on location (urban vs non-urban as well as geographical) and the sexual orientation with which it is predominantly associated. Weinberg emphasized the importance of applying the conceptual tools of the SM group of study when analyzing SM (293-294).

For example, leather communities emerged from gay male communities, so were comprised of primarily gay men, and use symbols and language distinct from other SM subcultures (Mosher, Levitt, and Manley 93, 113). Today, communities are distinguished as pansexual, heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or dyke/trans (Bauer "Playgrounds" 179). Each of these delineations of SM subculture has distinct scripts, roles, and embodiments associated with it, so the power dynamics performed in each are done in a unique context. The Central PA community is a "pansexual" community, in that it includes all sexual orientations and is not purposefully exclusive of any, but is composed of predominately heterosexual individuals and consists of very few individuals with non-normative gender identities[12].

SM communities exist in the form of munches, events or conventions, play nights in public venues as well as personal homes, clubs, and bars. Urban communities have access to SM bars and clubs while non-urban communities typically do not (Bell and Valentine 116). Members of the Central PA community live in a non-urban area. There are also online networks for SM. The most commonly used SM social networking site was launched in 2008 (Baku). Munches are often found through social networking sites, though they existed long before. Instead of focusing on the online SM community, my project will be limited to communities in physical meeting spaces, especially munches and play parties. The Central PA community is comprised of online groups, monthly munches (in a number of locations), play parties, and other social events.

The non-urban location of the Central PA community provides a more conservative political backdrop than an urban area. Bell and Valentine claimed that,

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[12] I have observed this information through my involvement with the community and via browsing member's profiles on FetLife.

"rural areas may best be represented as settings for traditional (and not especially enlightened) moral (including sexual) standards," and that there are "intense heteronormative pressures" in rural life (115-116). This may be due to lack of facilities or a lack of groups to provide visibility of non-normatively identified people. Many parts of Central PA are rural, while others exist as small to medium sized towns surrounded by rural area. The SM community is certainly influenced by the conservative area in which it exists. "Heteronormative pressures" inhibit the formation of queer communities and may encourage the reproduction of heteronormative dynamics within the SM community.

By analyzing participants in a specific community, I can consider their experiences within a shared context. Looking at SMers in a non-urban location is important because marginalized identities have even less visibility in non-urban spaces. Scott Herring describes conceptions of rural-based queers as 'infinitely disruptive' to the metro-inclinations of lesbian and gay studies across racial, national, and socio-economic divides (10). Since SM studies have focused on SMers in urban areas, or in numerous geographical areas (such as in nation-wide surveys), this is applicable to SM studies. Moreover, SM is a queer sexuality in that it is non-normative in many ways. Thus, researching non-urban SMers challenges the idea of a metro-normativity of kink identity and further disrupts conceptions of queer identities. As Herring notes, a metro-normativity exists across many demographic signifiers; analyzing non-urban communities can help to de-link such signifiers from metro-normativity.

*Method*

**Participants**

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Participants were required to be at least 18 years of age, identify with an SM role, and consider themselves at least somewhat active in SM. By way of finding participants through online groups that meet in Central PA, another criteria is that they had to be part of a SM community in Central PA. I interviewed 10 participants: six women, and four men. See Table 1 for an overview of the demographics. People in the submissive-type role were overrepresented for men and women.

People in the Central PA groups come from a few minutes to over an hour away to attend munches, play parties, and other social events. Individuals may attend events and munches in more than one city. I have observed that the majority of the women identity as submissive and most men identify as dominant, a trend that reflects traditional gender dynamics as well as the gendered history of sadism and masochism. Men and women appear to identify equally as switches. The number of men in this community seems to be marginally more than women.

**Procedure**

I recruited participants by posting an advertisement in groups for local munches on the popular kinky social networking site, FetLife. Interested individuals e-mailed me to indicate their desire to participate. Then, I sent them a consent form outlining the nature of the study and a questionnaire that they were to complete and return via e-mail as a sign of consent. They assigned themselves a pseudonym on the questionnaire, used to identify them from therein in order to protect participants' privacy and also to allow me to link their questionnaire responses to their interview transcript.

I interviewed members of the stated community to understand their conceptions and understandings of gender within SM, to analyze their SM roles, and to confirm,

reject, or complicate what we already know about SM.  I conducted the interviews in a semi-structured format, recording them for transcription purposes.  I attempted to cover all questions on my protocol with each participant, but asked additional questions for clarification and depth as well as to explore any interesting themes brought up by the individual.  Interviews took between 40 minutes and 1.5 hours.  I utilized the snowball method in addition to advertisements: at the end of each interview, I invited the participant to ask anyone they thought might be interested to contact me about the study, and provided them a consent form or advertisement to give out.

After conducting the interviews, I transcribed each within a few weeks and then deleted the audio files.  Three years after completion of this paper, pseudonymous transcripts will be archived in the Leather Archives and Museum in Chicago.  All participants consented to archival of their transcripts.

**Materials**

The initial questionnaire included questions regarding demographic information and basic SM involvement and role identification.  My interview questions were developed after reading a substantial amount of previous literature on SM.  I revised them between interviews, adding questions as needed.  The interview began with questions about participants' general history with SM and the community.  Then I asked questions about their conceptions of dominance, submission, and gender roles, and how gender was involved in their scenes as well as their SM identity.  Finally, I inquired about the subversive possibility of SM and feminism's role in the community.  Please see Appendices B and C for the full questionnaire and interview protocol, respectively.

**Data Analysis**

In my analysis, I used thematic coding, following the process lined out by Braun and Clarke (87). Braun and Clarke are one of the few to set out a detailed guide, elucidating the process. I hope to elucidate my own so that my research process is open to critique and readily available for others to replicate. Braun and Clarke broke down the process into five main phases: 1) Familiarize yourself with the data; 2) Generating Codes; 3) Searching for Themes; 4) Reviewing Themes, and 5) Defining Themes.

**Phase 1:** I had come up with my research questions, stated above, before I began the interview process. I conducted all of my interviews and transcribed each transcript myself. After each interview, I filled out a form of general questions guiding my reflection on the interview. I thought about what stood out to me, if I thought the participant seemed unsure of any response, and how I thought the interview went. This was the beginning of the process of familiarization. After transcription was complete, I skimmed through each transcript to refresh my ideas of their content. While familiarizing myself, I began to think about the similarities and differences in participant's responses. I noticed some people described dominance and masculinity with very similar traits, for example, while others did not. Some participants described BDMS as creating a genderless space, while others said gender mattered and affected the power dynamics of their scenes.

**Phase 2:** The following steps were taken analyzing the first four transcripts, then the second four, and finally the last two: I read through each and underlined phrases that I thought were relevant to my research questions. I read through each a second time and made notes interpreting responses and highlighting themes.

Then I read through them on the software-coding program MaxQDA and put phrases into relevant codes. As I transcribed more transcripts, I found new themes emerging that I hadn't noticed among the previous transcripts (not that they weren't there, but the frequency and relevance did not stand out to me yet). As I coded, I looked for new themes as well as for phrases that fit into the themes I already had. After coding in MaxQDA, I compared my coding on the software to what I highlighted on paper and went back and coded anything I missed that was still relevant. I did this to allow myself to look at the transcript without copying my previous remarks, in order to allow codes to continue to emerge inductively.

On my sixth transcript, and I felt my coding had reached saturation. At this point, I did not find more codes because phrases all fit into existing codes. I had 50 codes (including stand-alone themes and sub-codes) to search for at that time.

**Phase 3:** I searched for themes as more and more quotes were coded. After reading through the first four transcripts and coding on Max QDA, I put some of the codes into themes. The codes were the initial categories I created to group quotes that seemed at all relevant to my research questions, and the themes were the categories grouping codes together. Initially I coded for everything to do with masculinity, femininity, power dynamics, feminism and gender. I arranged codes into themes based on common content. For example, anything to do with feminist identity, feminism's role, or that I thought showed feminist or anti-feminist values went into the theme of "feminist." Some quotes were coded in multiple codes, and later I re-examined them to see whether they were relevant in all coding groups as the code related to the theme and the theme to my research questions.

**Phase 4:** Throughout coding, I moved code-groups around into different themes as it seemed more relevant. The more transcripts I coded, the more cohesive the themes became. After eight, almost all themes had multiple sub-themes, whereas after a couple transcripts, most "themes" were single codes or a code and their opposite. I coded the last two transcripts, and still found no need to add further codes. Then, I examined the phrases in each coded category, and rearranged quotes so they were coded in a way more relevant to answering my research questions. At this point, I was not adding any more quotes to the codes and had reached saturation within codes.

**Phase 5:** Once I completed coding all transcripts, I reconsidered the organization of themes, aligning themes and subthemes in logical categories and renaming if necessary. I looked at my existing themes, and considered them in the context of my research question and placed them in their final arrangements in a way that was logical in response to my research questions. I organized all codes into three major themes with relevant sub themes. Please see Table 2 for the full thematic structure.

**<u>Epistemological Perspective</u>**

My method was an overlay of both essentialist and constructionist thinking- referred to as a 'contextualist' method (Braun and Clarke 81). I report the reality the participants narrated in order to give agency to their answers, while also acknowledging that all experiences and the language used to convey them are constructed by culture and are simultaneously reproducing culture. Truth is understood as multiple and subjective (Ussher and Taylor 295). Working from a feminist standpoint, I aimed to give agency to participants in the SM subculture by

asking individuals in the Central Pennsylvania community what they thought about gender and SM.

**<u>Reflexivity Statement</u>**

I approached this research from the standpoint of an SM and feminist identified person. I came to this work because I found myself in conflict over my feminist identity and my SM identity. How could I submit to a man and still subvert the patriarchy? As a switch, I explore different SM dynamics with my partner and others in which I am sometimes the top, the dominant, the submissive, or the bottom, and sometimes both. I have come to understand that it is more important for me to find out what I enjoy and desire rather than to restrict myself based on whether those desires align with traditional gender expectations. Acknowledging and claiming my own desire, as a woman, is a feminist act. I feel that there is subversive power in choosing to engage in non-normative sexual acts. They are not necessarily subversive to patriarchal gender norms, but they are subversive in that they challenge ideas of normative sexuality in general. However, I still worry about falling into a role that perpetuates the patriarchal norms I fight to undo. Similarly, I would be uncomfortable immersing myself in a SM community that celebrates normative gender-power dynamics to the detriment of non-normative gender-power dynamics. SM communities, by engaging in sexually transgressive practices, have great potential to subvert normative conceptions of sexuality, gender, and power.

As a feminist, I have a particular interest in the feminist value of SM. Before this research, I was vaguely familiar with the historical feminist discourse on SM. Now, quite familiar, I consider my own actions in the context of this historical situation. My

feminist values also led me to create a study that allowed for the voices of the research subjects to be heard, in an attempt to break down the researcher-researched power dynamics. I wanted to give SMers agency in contributing to their history in academia. By having their experiences and thoughts represented in my study, participants have contributed to academia.

Moreover, my involvement in SM provided a contextual background for conceiving of my study. My observation that most women are in the submissive role and most men dominant led me to my initial research and my final research questions. As an insider, I was already familiar with the language used in the Central PA community. Being familiar with people in the community and having an overall positive experience with them, I am hesitant to call them or their SM involvement sexist. My own experience with SM led me to having beliefs aligned with pro-SM feminists before beginning this study, though they were not well thought out. Regardless, as an academic, I am able to consider the possibility of SM practices being sexist or anti-feminist, and moreover, consider the greater meaning of SMers' actions.

*Results*

**Position and Influence**

My position as an SM-identified college student, woman, and participant in the Central PA BDSM community was both beneficial and influential to my research. It was beneficial in that I already had access to groups in the community, and could advertise as a vetted member. The community is wary of "intruders" entering the community spaces and disrupting the safe space, not only because of discrimination faced by SMers, but in attempts to avoid predators entering the space and taking advantage of perhaps

less-experienced members (Wright 1, 15).  Individuals could trust me as an "insider," making them less likely to ignore my calls for participants.  As a young, feminine woman, I embody a non-threatening stance.  When this is accompanied by my member-status, interviewees may have been more likely to share with me and to be honest about their SM experiences.

It was easier for me to analyze literature and my results than if I had not been part of this SM community because I was already familiar with the language of the community as well as the groups within Central PA.  However, this may have been a limitation as well in that I could have assumed a participant and I shared a mutual definition when in fact they conceived of it differently.  I attempted to avoid this by inquiring to how they thought of role-definitions and considering their answers in relation to all of their descriptions.  For the most part, I did not intuit that participants were telling me what I wanted to hear.   I felt they were trying to honestly answer the questions I posed.  It is reasonable to think they trusted my motives because I am SM-identified.  One submissive participant may have been holding back because, as he indicated afterwards, my attire was slightly intimidating because it included footwear that his dominants often donned- boots.  As a woman, it is reasonable to think participants were more open to sharing their emotions with me, because of the gendered expectation that women are compassionate and caring.  One woman-identified participant indicated that she trusted women more readily because of a shared gender experience, so she probably would have shared more cautiously if interviewed by a man instead.  Another woman expressed distaste for non-gender conforming individuals.  As someone who generally appears normatively feminine, she

may have considered me as like her and on her side, and thus was open to sharing her thoughts. If I had presented in a less gender-conforming manner at her interview, she may have been hesitant to share her opinions and regarded my objectives with less regard, answering more curtly. Lastly, because I am involved in the SM community, I have a favorable perception of it and even a personal stake in its feminist affects.

To guard against this biasing my analysis, I have acknowledged and examined my perceptions of SM, and tried to understand them in relation to previous literature on SM and feminism. As an academic and a feminist, I am interested in nuances, in being true to the individual when discussing their experiences, and in considering all aspects of a debate. I have posed my preconceptions as a question, and am not looking to confirm them but to analyze them and find conclusions and new questions that will reshape them.

## Theme 1: Context

My themes emerged in direct conversation with my research questions. The question of context sets up the potential to subvert or perpetuate patriarchal structures. I will include minimal quotes in this theme because my results were reflective of previous research, as explained in the introduction. It is significant, though, that my findings confirmed previous ones because of the unique location of my sample. I will provide an overview of how the results in each theme reflected past literature as a reminder.

## Subtheme: Consent and Communication are Central

Most participants voiced the centrality of consent and communication in SM scenes and relationships. Taylor and Ussher also found this theme among their participants (297).

*It's one of the first things you learn- how to negotiate. –Torc*

*But with women I tend to be harsher with, like…objectification or degradation, if they like it of course. Consent being had. -Gabrielle*

Moreover, when describing dominance and submission, many participants pointed out that good dominants and submissives should be good listeners and able to communicate well with one another.

*[Dominants] have to be a very good listener I think because you have to listen to your submissive and have to be able to read them and keep an open mind in what they want to do. –Dregg*

*[Submission is]… good listener, um, able to communicate very well. In some ways I believe that the submissive or even the bottom has to be able to communicate what their desires are, what their needs are, because doms aren't mind readers either.- MsA*

They also described dominants and submissive as needing to trust and care for one another.

*They have to, the other thing is there has to be trust on both sides. –Dregg*

**Subtheme: Understandings of Power**

Participants, like Ussher and Taylor's, described SM play as having a "power exchange" where the submissive gives up control and the dominant accepts the control (298).

*It's always been a power exchange thing. Um, even with tying somebody up it's still a power exchange. –MsA*

Some understood the submissive to hold more power.

> *And a lot of people who don't understand BDSM, they don't understand the submissive holds, in a way, more power than the dom, because she can stop the scene at any time she wants, she can control the speed of it, she has use of the safe word, and it's up to her how the scene goes. –Dregg*

Most described the dominant as having or taking control and the submissive as giving up control. This is indicative of a power exchange.

> *I love taking the control. –Gabrielle*

> *I like giving up control… –Winky*

**Subtheme: Distinct from reality**

Most of my participants indicated a belief that SM, the scene and/or the community, was distinct from everyday life.

> *No, [the rest of my life is not affected by being into BDSM]. Because I think it's very separate. Two separate worlds. –Elisabeth*

> *I believe that, uh, when you're playing…it has a whole lot more to do with them as a submissive, a slave, or a switch, than it does whether they are men or women. –MsA*

MsA's qualification of "when you're playing" indicates that certain meanings, here that role is more important than gender, exist during scenes but not necessarily outside of them. So, SM play is constructed as distinct space, separate from "reality," as was important to Ritchie and Barker's participants (234). Many participants indicated a distinction between SM and everyday life by describing SM in opposition to "real life."

> *So I'm kind of more dominant in real life…and not really submissive at all. – Gabrielle*

> *I'm not a real feminine person, and but I am more feminine I guess in my slave role or submissive role than I am in real life. –Winky*

This distinction indicates that participants see SM as a distinct community and one that is not reflective of the dominant culture (not like the "real world").

**Conclusions**

The existing conceptions of SM in the broader BDSM community of SM being about consent, communication, caring for partners, and power dynamics are represented in this sample. Participants in my study were accessing the same narratives as others before them and were not found to be creating new narratives to understand SM.

## Theme 2: Upholds Gender Norms

Some participants described the SM community and their experiences and conceptions of SM in ways that reflected a gender normative framework. These participants expressed negative beliefs about gender non-conformity, provided examples and descriptions that were reflective of gender norms, and indicated positive reinforcement for normative gender performance.

### Subtheme: Encouragement for Normative Gender Performance

A few described normative gender performance to be preferred, more accepted, and/or encouraged in the SM community.

> *Stereotypical gender roles are rejected? No. I think they're encouraged. –Elisabeth*

> *So even though I obtain a great deal of joy being collared… they were like, "ehhhhh, you shouldn't be a guy." –Fish*

> *Yes, I would say that regular masculine or feminine roles are accepted, overall. There are a lot of people out there who want men to be men and women to be women. -MsA*

The acceptance and reinforcement of normative gender roles reflects the dominant culture. When people enter the community, they don't free themselves from the greater society in which they exist. Some individuals in the SM community prefer normative male-dominant and female-submissive roles.

A couple interviewees said that, BDSM not only exhibits normative gender roles, but amplifies them.  Their descriptions seemed value neutral, describing SM as a harmless reflection of pre-existing power dynamics.

*Yeah, especially like Master/slave, Dom/sub in your male/female, I think that they are…what it is is it's just like your regular male/female is magnified in the BDSM community.  –Winky*

*…people have so many different ways to live and interact with each other that BDSM might ritualize some of those interactions but I don't think it's changing them so much. I think it's just taking what's there and amplifying them.  –Fish*

The narrative of SM utilizing pre-existing power dynamics and exaggerating them is found in much previous literature.  Krafft-Ebing described this excessiveness as the pathological symptom of sadism and masochism (Moore 151).  Given the movement to overcome pathologization of SM, this is only still relevant because it is remembered in the discourse of SM discrimination.  Many authors described the exaggeration as an aspect of SM's performativity (McClintock 89; Weiss 17).  Other authors saw it as a parody of such power dynamics (Ussher and Taylor 303; Hopkins 136).  By performing the roles in an exaggerated fashion, and sometimes on "mis-matched" bodies, patriarchy is made light of and consciously manipulated.

The greater acceptance of normative gender roles is to be expected but is not a necessary characteristic.  For example, Bauer's description of the dyke+ SM community indicates a greater acceptance for "gender fucking" than for gender conformity ("Playgrounds" 179).  The dyke+ community excludes cis men, straight practitioners, as well as vanilla people ("Transgressive" 234).  The predominance of heterosexual-identified individuals in the Central PA community may be the reason for reinforcement of gender norms.  Heterosexuality carries the script of gender conformity, of

stereotypical woman with stereotypical man, thus lending itself to gender conformity more readily than queer sexual orientations which are in themselves gender transgressions.

**Subtheme: Unaccepting of Gender Non-conformity and Not a Safer Space**

Only two participants expressed restrictive views of gender non-conformity acceptance.

> *I don't have problems with transgenders, it's just- don't wear a beard and a (inaudible) dress. –Fish*

> *And I know I should have an open mind but I think those people are damn weird. I mean, I'm fascinated by them, I follow them around in grocery stores and stuff, but that's just not my thing, ya know. –Winky*

Fish's quote expresses the notion that gender transgression is only ok if you pass- that is, a woman must look "like a woman" for it to be acceptable. Fish had personal experience with gender non-conformity. He used to cross-dress fairly often, and presented on SecondLife[13] as a woman through his most often used avatar. Moreover, he recognized his position of male slave as non-normatively gendered in the Gorean world, but he never expressed that his experiences were "wrong."

Winky demonstrates that she is not accepting of gender transgressors but also acknowledges that it is desirable that she be accepting. She may have expressed that she "should be" accepting because the SM community emphasizes acceptance, and since our discussion focused on the community, she was acknowledging an expectation in such a context. She also expressed a disgust for bisexual male submissives, indicating she looked down on the transgression of masculinity implied in submissiveness, and

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[13] Much of Fish's experience was in the Gorean community on the virtual world of 3D simulations that is SecondLife.

doubly so on the double gender transgression of being submissive and attracted to other men.

> *I mean I like [male submissives] as friends, but I just always think they're wimpy, ya know. And especially bisexual male subs…As soon as, like if I'm looking at a profile and I see it's a bisexual male sub I'm like…go on to the next one, ya know. There's just something in, for the bisexual part I'm like ehhhh.* –Winky

This comment speaks to Butler's theory that normative gender is tied to ideas of heterosexuality (*Gender Trouble* 17). Winky, as a straight woman, may be uncomfortable with gender transgressions in men because it questions her heterosexuality- if they are feminine and male, the subject of her desire, what does that say about her?

Many also expressed that there were still unaccepting people in the community, but understood that this was because there are unaccepting people in every community.

> *Unfortunately, as in the vanilla world, there are still narrow-minded people in the community, too. Ya know, "Your kink is not as good as my kink."* –MsA

> *I have a friend who identifies with being queer, as opposed to being trans, and he wasn't allowed into a party because he identified as queer, and he was really ticked off, and really hurt.* –MsA

MsA's second comment indicates discrimination based on non-normative gender presentation exists in this community. Trans people are generally accepted, but if they present in a genderqueer manner they may not be. This still shows higher levels of acceptance than the dominant culture, but lacks a full embracement of gender transgression. People in this SM community may be open to learning about non-normative identities and genders, but some spaces still place a higher value on gender conformity and fail to question the gender binary, unlike the dyke+ community (Bauer

191).  This may be due to the fact that the Central PA community is predominately

heterosexual.  Sheila Jeffreys theorizes that heterosexual desire requires the

construction of gender difference (77).  Coupled with Butler's idea that normative

gender assumes heterosexuality, it follows that heterosexual people would tend to, but

not necessarily, prefer gender normativity and reject gender difference (*Gender Trouble*

17).

**Subtheme: Reflects Gender Stereotypes**

All participants associated dominance with masculinity and submissiveness was

associated with femininity.

> *SR: What characteristics do you associate with submissiveness?*
> *Elisabeth:  … Feminine*
>
> *SR: What characteristics do you associate with dominance?*
> *Elisabeth: Masculine.*
>
> *[responding to questions about submission] …in my mind it's very feminine when*
> *you want to please your man, have an open mind, and you want to look your best*
> *for him. –Dregg*
>
> *[responding to questions about submission]……beauty.  And…being willing to serve*
> *and take care of matters- just like a mother would.  Take care of whatever needs to*
> *done, so that the man doesn't have to do it.  To me that's feminine. –Winky*

Now, their descriptions are reflective of dominant narratives of gender

expectations, but this is to be expected when one is asked to describe traits. The lack of

queer descriptions of gender indicates that the participants live in a space where

normative embodiments are the reality- as opposed to living in a queer, urban

community, for example, like the dyke + community (Bauer, "Playgrounds" 180).

A few described female dominants either as having a masculine personality or

assuming one when they were playing.

*She can be the most feminine woman you've ever seen but when she is in full on Dom mode, the outfit she wears, she takes on more of a masculine persona almost. It's almost like a super hero type female. –Dregg*

*…they've all been fairly confident and masculine. –Jake Edwards (referring to his dominants, who have been men and women)*

Describing female dominants as masculine reflects hegemonic gender roles and may reinforce them. Many would describe this embodiment as gender transgression and even subversion. Indeed, in lesbian SM, the dominants have been described as "reclaiming the phallus" and parodying "the male oppressor" through such an embodiment (Hornsby 69). However, because this requires dominance to be a male trait, it creates an imagined link between dominance and masculine presenting people. The effects of this are seen in participants' tendency to see women as less dominant and take female dominants less seriously.

*Ya know, if I was a little more feminine, people wouldn't take me as serious as I am [as a dominant]. –MSergeant*

*I think [women need to show more dominance for me to submit to them] to help me take them more seriously, because, again, it's one of those thing that…[submission]'s not something I give easily to people. –Gabrielle*

Participants tended to assume men were dominant leaning and women were submissive leaning, because, again, that is the script for heterosexual relationships and of the dominant culture, especially in regards to sexual dynamics. A few also expressed that community members tended to assume the same.

*You get a whole bunch of idiots who assume that any woman- I'm gonna speak for spank parties because those are the ones I've usually been to- who basically assume that any woman at a play party is a) gonna play with them and b) is always a bottom. … So, you get a whole bunch of people in the scene like in any other subculture, and not all of them are aware that these things are stereotypes. –Torc*

The linking of dominance or submission with a gender presentation restricts the possibilities of embodying it if one wants to effectively portray the characteristic. It also, as we have seen, leads to restrictive expectations for SM roles. There are fairly equal numbers of female dominants and male dominants, but, the women may have a harder time being accepted for this role in pansexual or heterosexual SM spaces. Following Bauer's theory that lack of straight privilege allowed SMers of the dyke+ community to explore gender, perhaps the dominance of heterosexuality and thus the attachment to straight privilege in this community holds participants back from fully accepting gender transgression within roles and scripts ("Transgressive" 247).

Nevertheless, as we have also seen, associating dominance with masculinity or submission with femininity creates scripts from which individuals can pull to set the narrative for a scene, like Bauer's participants did ("Playgrounds" 179). Individuals can "play with gender" by choosing different scripts and even inverting them through gender or SM role, although my participants largely did not express this.

**Subtheme: Feminine Cross-dressing as Humiliation**

A couple individuals shared stories where cross-dressing as a woman was used to invoke humiliation.

> *I was home by myself and she made me clean around the house wearing an apron and purse and different things like that, and I've worn heels around the house. … It was [being a little feminized myself] and humiliation. –MSergreant*

> *…there's a lot of humiliation involved in [cross-dressing] I'm not big on that part, so. –Jake Edwards*

These instances equate femininity with shame, particularly on male bodies. This reflects a devaluing of femininity in the wider culture.

MSergeant also shared a story about making a woman cross-dress, though he was the only participant who did so.

*I made a woman cross dress before. I gave her a strap-on and made her go out in public and see what it's like to be a male, and have that problem of re-adjusting all day. –MSergeant*

The first anecdotes draw on the narrative of emasculation through feminine dress and duties while MSergeant's latter anecdote explains that the woman cross-dressed to gain insight into the experience of men. While Bauer's participants would embrace narratives of exploring gender identity to really understand another role, they may not use the narrative of humiliation and femininity because they value all genders and gender transgression ("Playgrounds" 182, 191). Although some may say experiencing humiliation is to experience what it's like to be feminine in a male body particularly, this reflects a devaluing of such a gender presentation by describing it as shameful. While such a gender presentation may appear to be devalued, the use of cross-dressing does allow men to "try it on" and embody a non-normative gender for a scene and, further, does not necessarily translate to everyday life.

The value-neutral description of a forced woman to man cross-dressing, and also its description as an insightful experience, reflects the greater value placed on masculinity in our culture and the perceived naturalness, relatively, of woman desiring to embody masculinity in order to access greater freedoms (Halberstam 2, 6). As Jeffreys describes the "desire for gender" strengthens "the heterosexual regime," cross-dressing may be a way of re-instating heterosexual desire (75). However, while Butler theorizes that the gender binary creates a possibility of gender transgression that is still understood via the binary, she thinks swapping gender role assumptions, which cross-

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dressing may do, could work to subvert normative gender roles (*Gender Trouble* 29, 31).

**Subtheme: Gender Matters in Scenes**

Quite a few articulated that gender affects the power dynamics of their scenes.

*...like I said, I can only submit to a man. –Elisabeth*

*Oh definitely, [gender] definitely [plays a role in the power dynamics of my scenes]. –Winky*

*To a degree. Um, especially with my girls and my boy. They see me as a mother type.  Ya know they all call me "Momma."  And I see that as the softer side of my dominance, as the nurturing side  –MsA.*

Those who described their gender as influential to their play generally associated it with the embodiment of gendered scripts, as shown in MsA's quote.  This implies that gendered scripts carry expectations for embodiment of the same gender within the script in this community.  Although the option exists to queer the script by embodying it differently, individuals in my sample seem to more readily turn to normative embodiments of such tropes.

For some participants, it played a role because of their heterosexual orientation. The scenes were not as erotic or did not in result in the kind of play they wanted if the person was of the same gender, because they were not erotically attracted to them.  For others, gender expectations seemed to play a role.

*I already trust you just because you're a female as well, but now you need to show me something more for me to submit to you just because of that  –Gabrielle*

*I can get more switchy, like more toppy and dommy, with women.  Mmhmm. Absolutely. ... Um...probably has to do with gender roles. –Prizma*

*I know that I feel more comfortable playing the bottom with other men and feel more comfortable playing the top with a woman.  Um, and to what extent that has to do with society, well it probably does. –Torc*

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Many also expressed feeling more protective of women. Among the switches, this was a reason articulated for why it felt more natural to top a woman and bottom to a man.

> *Cuz it makes me check on the females more than I do males. I care for females more than I do...That's just how I am. –MSergeant*

> *Yeah, naturally inclined to top, even if with a female top I do get a bit, a touch protective I think. –Torc*

Again, we can see the dominant gender narratives entering the power dynamics of play- here it is the narrative that woman needs protection. This seems to be due in part to the gendered definitions of dominance and submission, and a few participants expressed awareness of norms affecting their inclinations in this way. If masculine and feminine people were equally expected to embody each SM role, one would feel less inclined to act one way or the other to them, since that is based on an assumption of their "natural" identity and desires. Interestingly, one way individuals reconcile this may be through their construction of origin narratives- narratives of how they came to their SM identity. Yost and Hunter found that submissive men were more likely than submissive women to describe their SM identity as intrinsic, and postulated that this may be to justify a non-normative role (250, 254).

**Conclusions**

The encouragement of normative gender performance and lack of acceptance of queer genders that exists in this community reflects norms of the dominant culture and provides some support for *Against Sadomasochism*'s arguments that SM reproduces patriarchal power (4). It also supports Weiss's argument that SM is a product of

"capitalist cultural formations" of social hierarchies, and would not exist in the same way without them (6). Feminism supports an acceptance and valuing of all genders; the Central PA SM community has not yet reached this ideal.

**Theme 3: Rejects Gender Norms**

Some participants described the SM community and their experiences and conceptions of SM in ways that defied a gender normative framework. They expressed positive beliefs about gender non-conformity, provided examples and descriptions of gender norm transgression, and indicated understandings of gender as fluid and irrelevant to SM.

**Subtheme: Accepting of Gender Non-conformity and A Safe Space for Gender Transgression**

Most participants described the BDSM community as more accepting of non-normative gender expression and roles than the dominant culture. Many expressed encountering more gender non-conforming individuals within the community because of the greater level of acceptance. Moreover, most individuals expressed support for gender non-conformity.

> *The gender norms- because you're already in such an accepting space, so when somebody comes cross-dressed, nobody, most people don't even think twice. –Prizma*

> *Um, probably the same philosophy I have for most things is 'live and let live.' If that's what makes you happy and you're not hurting anyone else, then go for it. It doesn't bother me one way or the other. –MsA*

> *I actually like it because I think they're able to express...I think if they're doing that, it's what they really feel inside. –Dregg*

While most said they were just as comfortable expressing or exploring their

gender in the outside community as in the BDSM community, a few expressed that the

SM community was a more comfortable space for this.

*Yeah I would say [I'm more comfortable exploring my gender in the community], yeah. … because I would never go to work in a dress (laughs). –Jake Edwards*

*I feel more comfortable probably exploring like everything within the kink community.  So, probably.  Like if I wanted to explore my gender identity that would be the place that I would do it. –Prizma*

A couple individuals expressed that SM was more accepting than dominant

culture because of its subcultural nature.

*I think because in a way, there's getting to be more acceptance of BDSM, but it's always been more of an underground thing.  And, we don't want to be ashamed of what we're doing, and if we're going to be negative to somebody else who is in this lifestyle, what makes us any better than them, just because some guy wants to cross dress, that's his kink that's his thing. –Dregg*

Overall people experience a greater level of acceptance in the kink community.

This is reflective of the feminist value of valuing all variances of identities, and shows

that this community is moving towards identity equality.  The greater acceptance is

probably in part due to, as what Dregg described, the marginalized status of SM.  In a

2008 Internet survey of 3,058 adults 37.5% of respondents reported experiencing

discrimination based on their BDSM-leather-fetish related involvement (Wright 7).  A

similar pattern is seen in the "strong camaraderie" of gay male leather communities

whose members hold a doubly marginalized status as gay within the dominant culture

and leather/SM within gay culture (Mosher, Levitt, and Manley 95, 107).  SMers have a

shared experience of being marginalized because of their sexual practices, and are also

cautious of outing people for their personal practices.  It is reasonable that this way of

thinking would carry over for other marginalized identities and practices, such as gender non-conformity.

Moreover, the significant presence of dominants who are women and submissives who are men embodies gender transgression. McClintock describes how male passivity becomes "nothing 'abnormal'" in the SM community, and, further, that female dominants question normative gender conceptions by "expos[ing] the possibility" that femininity is synonymous with passivity (93, 106). Because of the community's awareness of their own discrimination, it has a level of accountability that enforces adherence to the basic community standards (Wright 15). I have found this to be the case in my own experience. If someone was not accepting of the basic gender transgression a female dominant embodies, it is likely they would not have strong ties in the SM community, in Central PA or elsewhere.

**Subtheme: SM renders gender irrelevant**

Multiple participants understood SM to transcend gender. They expressed that gender became irrelevant or at least less meaningful because what matters is the dominance and submission- the SM role.

> *I guess because it's no longer about gender, it's about dominance and submission and that's how it breaks it down because… you're no longer looking for a man or a woman, you're looking for a dominant to dominate you. –Jake Edwards*

> *…because, again, you're sort of in that moment or lost from that moment, whichever, so there is no society. –Jake Edwards*

> *I believe that, uh, when you're playing…it has a whole lot more to do with them as a submissive, a slave, or a switch, than it does whether they are men or women. Um, if someone who likes pain, it doesn't matter if they're a man or a woman. –MsA*

This reiterates the importance of SM role over gender, as Yost found in the fantasy narratives of SMers ("Sexual Fantasies" 149). Because fantasy contextualizes

SM play, it is logical that SM role would be more important than gender in play as it is in fantasies. Further, the phenomena of "subspace" and "domspace," when an individual enters an altered state of consciousness as a result of play – what Jake Edwards seems to be describing – indicate a disconnect between player and reality. Some of Taylor and Ussher's participants described entering a "heightened state of consciousness" and getting a neurochemical "high" (305-306). If sub or dom space is the goal, then the goal is to transcend the confines of society. These phenomena indicate that SM is a transcendent or out-of-body experience, which may be understood as spiritual or meta-physical (Taylor and Ussher 305-306).

In a similar vein, a few said that gender did not influence the power dynamics of their SM play.

> *And the fact that I'm a woman just doesn't enter into it. –Torc*

> *[in response to asking about gender and power in SM scenes] I wouldn't really see it being a factor. –Dregg*

These participants see their SM play relying on aspects other than gender to create power dynamics. Perhaps they do not utilize role-play and so do not rely on gendered scripts as much. Instead perhaps they use dominance and submission play that is psychological and so places less significance on the gender of the actor and more significance on the effects of the action.

**Subtheme: Gender is Fluid**

Most participants explained gender roles as fluid in descriptions of their own identity as neither/nor masculine or feminine, in understandings of gender and SM role, and, less often, in conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

> *I don't think of myself as either [feminine or masculine] –Torc*

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*I feel like…you don't have to be those things to be masculine or feminine, you could, you know, in some cases switch the qualities.-Gabrielle*

A handful noted that their descriptions of masculinity and femininity were socially constructed and were not descriptions of innate woman-ness or man-ness. Some noted that they do not have to be embodied by certain sexes, indicating they believed gender and sex to be delinked and fluid.

*[Masculinity is…] taking initiative in relationships…this is so gender stereotypical. –Prizma*

*But that isn't true for every single masculine person or every single feminine person. –MsA*

*Well I think how [normative gender roles are] rejected is there are people who are just kind of like…gender-fluid, you know, "I might be a boy, I might be a girl." "Maybe I wanna cross dress, maybe I don't." Ya know, "hey I'm a male, I'm a submissive and I'm ok with it," or, "hey I'm a female and I'm a dominant and I'm ok with it." –Gabrielle*

Gabrielle is pointing to the role-playing aspect of SM, in that you can be a "boy" and maybe a "girl" at different times by performing as one or the other in a scene through acting, dress, and/or name changing. This fluidity of gender embodiment is reflective of the ways the dyke+ SM community encourages one person to explore many gender embodiments ("Playgrounds" 182).

Prizma described her personality in everyday life as being masculine because it is strong and dominant. She said that she doesn't really think of herself as gendered in the SM community. This could be because she is embodying the different roles of dominance in everyday life and submission in SM life, while also having those two aspects of her life integrated into one, so the distinction between these embodiments becomes blurred.

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The fact that participants recognized the social construction of gender conceptions indicates a consciousness of gender role and embodiment and thus a context in which such roles can be manipulated and maybe subverted. Taylor and Ussher's female participants explained that having an awareness of gender roles allowed them to embody maleness and critique "abusive behaviors through parodying them" via SM (303).

**Subtheme: Not Reflective of Gender Stereotypes**

Some cited the existence of female dominants and male submissives as evidence of gender role transgression. However, these roles were, as we saw, not as accepted in some people's experiences. Switches, embodying dominance and submission, are an interesting case because they experience a role that alters between conformity to gender expectations and transgression in the same body.

> *…people are kind of more ok with doing their own thing, whereas maybe in real life it's not ok for them to do really dominant things, a female to be really dominant in the workplace, or something like that. Ya know. But when it's nighttime and they're at the play party or whatever, the dominant side comes out. –Gabrielle*

> *I feel a lot more ok with telling people I'm bi or even expressing it … –Gabrielle*

Gabrielle indicated that woman may feel more comfortable transgressing gender norms by being dominant in the community. Since she sometimes plays as dominant, I inferred that she probably includes herself in this. I included her quote regarding her bisexuality because I thought it was interesting that she expressed this when asked about comfort expressing gender, and it reinforces the understanding of the community as more accepting. Sexuality and gender are linked through perceptions- individuals presenting a transgressive gender are often labeled as queer, for example.

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*I feel like you just don't see that too super often, like people conforming to very stereotypical gender roles in the kink community at all. –Prizma*

A few participants described gender as less important in the SM community than in dominant culture. This is likely due to the emphasis on SM role, like that found in Yost's study on fantasies of SMers (149), and a community based on transgressive sexual practices rather than gender, exemplified in Taylor and Ussher's participants' discourse of dissidence (302). Although, gender and sexuality overlap in important ways, which I think becomes more visible when pansexual SM communities such as Central PA are compared with queer SM communities.

**Subtheme: SM is subversive**

Most of the participants interpreted SM to be a practice or community that subverts norms of the dominant culture. This is similar to some of Taylor and Ussher's participants' descriptions of SM as dissidence (303).

*I think so, yes, [SM breaks down] like every day society's norms, yes. –Gabrielle*

*I think it breaks down gender norms. Um, I think it breaks down relationship norms. Like, ya know, one man one woman, ya know, marriage, have babies. –Prizma*

*Can it be subversive? In a focus on pleasure, it can; if you focus on awareness of what you're doing, awareness of yourself, awareness of society and what that says about you, and be comfortable with yourself despite what society says, then yeah it can certainly be subversive. –Torc*

Gayle Rubin echoes the idea that SM subverts the dominant culture. She explains that some of the women's movement, in the early 1980s, was preaching patriarchal ideas of sexuality, such as sexuality being a "male value and activity" and something "men imposed on women," and SM challenges these anxieties around women's sexuality ("Leather Menace" 217-218). Women in SM are embracing their sexuality, and, in some

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scenes and relationships, imposing it on men.  This is reflected Ritchie and Barker's

participants' descriptions of their SM experiences subverting traditional gender roles,

one of which embodied this by orgasming "first and more often" than men she

dominated in order to  "redress the orgasm balance" (233).  McClintock also describes

SM as subversive to dominant narratives of sexuality because it "deconstructs the

paradigm of genital oriented eroticism" in its use of non-erogenous zones for pleasure

(106; in Sisson 28)

Most participants did not mention SM as being subversive to gender norms.

However, Torc describes that a certain context- focus on pleasure, awareness of self,

actions, and connection with society- transforms a situation into a subversive one.  This

reflects previous literature that described a heightened awareness of embodied roles

situating SM as a potential site of subversion (Bauer, "Transgressive" 234; Ussher and

Taylor 303).

**Conclusions**

Some roles inherent in SM- the dominant woman and submissive man-

transgress hegemonic gender roles.  Some of my participants described these roles as

transgressive, and it is clear when considering hegemonic norms that women are

expected to be more submissive and men more dominant.  Some authors have said that

these roles still invoke a "desire for gender" in heterosexual terms, much like

butch/femme identities, and so reproduce patriarchal values (Jeffreys 75).  Hopkins and

others claim that SM "selectively replays surface patriarchal behaviors onto a different

contextual field" and the context makes an importance differences in meaning (123;

Califia 174; Yost 137).  Many participants in the Central PA community see SM as

subversive to the dominant culture and so must understand it to create meanings different from those produced when the same dynamics are exhibited in dominant culture. Two reasons they might see SM as subversive are the greater levels of acceptance of non-normative identities and practices, and the ability to construct one's identity within the community, expressed by many participants in previous studies (Ritchie and Barker 227; Bauer, "Transgressive" 234). When discussing the politics of lesbian SM, Butler describes the "dialectic of choice and desire" as "the crucial task for lesbian-feminism" ("Lesbian S & M" 174). It would seem that SM provides such dialectic for its members and is therefore working within the aims of feminism.

**Theme 4: Feminist?**

Participants provided many contextual descriptions of SM that reflect feminist values, as well as comments on their feminist identity and their understandings of feminism's role in the SM community. I considered my research question, "Do SM acts perpetuate or subvert gender-based inequality and oppression," in the context of feminist discourse. If SM perpetuates inequality and oppression, it is incongruent with feminism; on the other hand, if it subverts them, it is wholly aligned with feminism. Most participants said that feminism has a role in the SM community, but what that role was differed. There were many descriptions of feminist values in SM roles and play.

**Subtheme: Feminist Identity**

Four participants affirmed that they identified as a feminist.

*I believe so. I mean, there is that curiosity that I am looking for a dominant woman as somebody to have a relationship with. I do believe...ya know, in the issues of contraceptive access, of equal pay for equal work, but I'm...I mean it's, but I'm not sex-negative. I don't believe that porn is evil. I believe that the women who take part in it do have...free will to go into it, and they don't need to be protected from it. –Fish*

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Yes. ... *And I believe that any women can do [be a dominant] as well as any man. –MsA*

Three expressed feminist values, but did not identify with the term 'feminist.'

*I don't really think I do...I mean, I believe in like certain things. Ya know, equal pay for equal work, but I wouldn't consider myself like, raa feminist. And ya know I make my political choices based on things like that, like I consider them pretty important, up there, but. –Prizma*

*Every female should be treated equally, as far as I'm concerned. –MSergeant*

I think feminist values and feminist-identified people help to create a context in which normative gender roles can be defied and women can claim agency to their sexuality, for these are also feminist values. Moreover, 4 out of 9[14] individuals identifying as feminist is probably a greater ratio than that in dominant culture, or at least equal. This is coherent with Cross and Matheson's findings that SMers hold pro-feminist beliefs and are no more likely to be supportive of patriarchal values (146).

Two participants did not identify as feminist nor did they express feminist values.

*Not really, no. I'm just a mom. (laughs) The mom type. –Winky*

*No, [I don't identify as a feminist]. -Elisabeth*

Perhaps they do not identify with feminism or its values because their roles as submissive women conform to gender expectations and therefore they do not experience tension or questioning within their role. However, Elisabeth described her personality outside the SM community as dominant. Also, Winky described herself as someone who "[doesn't] follow the crowd," and was very sexually liberal and assertive

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[14] One participant misunderstood feminism to mean femininity, so ze was not considered here.

in her actions, which are resonant of feminist values. Perhaps she does not experience questioning in her entitlement to her sexual desires because her desires conform to what is expected of women- to desire submission to men.  Winky did say that her relationship situation is not accepted because of its non-normative dynamic.

A couple expressed tension between their feminist identity and their SM identity.

> *Yeah, [my feminist identity] makes it harder.  It's not something which I fully manage to reconcile.  It makes it harder to bottom, it makes it harder to submit, it definitely makes it harder to accept discipline… –Torc*

> *I mean probably if I considered myself more feminist, those things [like submitting] would be more difficult. … Like, that I already feel like I have a dominant personality.  If I consider myself a feminist on top of that, I'd be completely screwed. –Prizma*

I think the tension, especially for Torc as a Women's and Gender Studies student, comes from the anti-SM discourse in feminism and the rhetoric that a feminist must never submit to a man.

**Subtheme: Equal Power**

One of feminism's main goals is equality among the sexes (Cross and Matheson 146).  Many anti-SM feminists argued that SM created an unequal power balance that worked in favor of men (Russell 177).   Linden stated that SM affects our lives because it expressed sexuality and intimacy through "the paradigms of domination and humiliation", indicating it uses unbalanced power dynamics (3).  Russell made the comment, in reference to M/s relationships, "The word slave connotes no choice."

Some participants understood the submissive to hold more power.

> *And a lot of people who don't understand BDSM, they don't understand the submissive holds, in a way, more power than the dom, because she can stop the*

*scene at any time she wants, she can control the speed of it, she has use of the safe word, and it's up to her how the scene goes. –Dregg*

*Um…a lot of times people think that being submissive is being weak. And I don't agree, that's something I don't agree with at all. I think that most submissives are very strong. … Ya know, doesn't mean that someone's a doormat. It means that they're giving of themselves. –MsA*

Understanding the submissive to have power is congruent with Staci Newmahr's findings, which showed many SMers knew the bottom or submissive set the parameters and purpose of the play and thus held power (46).

Synthesizing the participants' responses, it seems to be the case that both dominants/tops and submissive/bottoms hold power in scenes. The "exchange" refers to the submissive individual choosing to offer control to another, and the other choosing to accept, and then exerting that control within the limits set by the submissive. The power exchange is equal. This debunks anti-SM feminists' concerns of an inherent unequal balance of powers in SM (Russell 177; Bar On 75). Ritchie and Barker's participants also expressed SM to be a more equal balance of powers- an exchange that empowered both/all participants (48).

In Newmahr's ethnographic study of a metropolitan SM community, found that SM challenges the idea that power is "possessed by one party" (42). SM, as she explained, focuses on a "dynamic" and an *exchange* of power, based in negotiations to ensure all participants have power (42).

**Subtheme: Empowered, Self-Knowing, Active Submissive**

Through participants' descriptions of submission, I found a common theme that the submissive needed to be able to know themselves- their desires and limits- and to

articulate them.  A few participants also described the submissive and/or the woman as taking an active role in the scene, and claiming their sexuality.

>*You've got to express yourself. It's one of the first things you learn- how to negotiate. How to express yourself.  How to separate your opinions from what society says and from what everybody else says they should be. –Gabrielle*

>*Also the focus on pleasure, considering a lot of the time in society, the focus on pleasure is very phallo-centric and on men, even a female submissive who focuses on her, gets pleasure out of the scenes and is really aware of what she wants and needs and negotiates to get that… –Torc*

When mapped onto women submissives, this creates a subversion of normative female submission.  Normally, a submissive female is understood to be passive and silent' moreover a female is expected to be sexually passive (Mcclintock 89).  In the community, a submissive, regardless of gender, must be active and vocal in order to negotiate a scene or relationship and to stop play when it may go further than desired.  Because of this, taking a submissive role could be empowering for women because it encourages them to speak up and be heard, which may very well be in opposition to their experience outside the community, expressed by Torc's comments below:

>*I've been called feminist whenever I express opinions that differentiate me from a doormat. –Torc*

>*Yeah, social, yeah socially probably silence in a lot of ways.  Women are encouraged to be silent, they're encouraged to be passive, encouraged to be always nurturing and self-sacrificing. –Torc*

Further, being "sweet" and "nice" are norms of femininity, and indicate passivity in relationships overall and an expectation to put one's needs (or desires) before your own (Parent and Moradi 959).  By transgressing phallocentric ideas of pleasure, as McClintock describes SM acts do, taking a sexually active role, and knowing and expressing one's desires, this places women in SM in an empowering and gender-

transgressive role (106).  When applied to the role of submissive, this exposes the

cultural specificity of the idea of submissiveness; that is, a submissive in SM is

understood and embodied differently than a submissive person acting in the context of

the dominant culture.  Let us look again at Russell's comment: "The word slave

connotes no choice" (177).  In SM, where a submissive or slave is expected to know

their self, express their desires and opinions, and obtain pleasure, we cannot say "slave

connotes no choice."

**Subtheme: SM Empowers Participants**

Most participants described feminism as empowering to women, and a number

also said SM was empowering to women or that feminism's role was empowering

SMers.

> *And I feel like it kind of empowers a lot of submissive women because it makes them realize like some people jump into the community so fast they just go with whatever they're told.  So it kind of helps them realize like, everything I've been told is not true. There are other ways to do things.  I can still be a powerful woman, and, you know, be submissive.  It doesn't have to be I have to give up everything. – Gabrielle*

It was mentioned that SM could be empowering to female submissives, female

dominants, and male submissives, but not for male dominants.  The logic was that it

empowers female submissives to feel like they can choose this despite the resistance

from much of feminism, and individuals in non-normative roles are empowered to

value their roles as much as a normative one.  Clearly, male dominants are the most

reflective of gender hegemony.

Torc expressed how she and people she knows understand that this provides a

space where individuals have greater agency and control than in the larger culture.

*"I've been in BDSM for X number of years, and then somebody was talking to me in the vanilla world and I realized- if this was in the BDSM world, I would safe-word out of this. I wouldn't let them do that to me, talk to me like that there."*

This is significant because it, again, negates some anti-SM feminist's claim that SM in inherently unequal. On the contrary, SMers are given tools to assert their limits, create a safe space, and share power.

**Subtheme: Feminism's Role in the SM Community**

Most expressed a role for feminism in SM.

*Feminism ought to and has a lot of roles in the BDSM community. … It's needed to…it's definitely needed to equalize the value of the roles of submissive and dominant. –Torc*

*It does I think, for female-female relationships it means something…ya know, cuz they really get into um, expressing their freedom whether they want to act like a male or female… –Winky*

*I suppose it kind of helps keep people on their toes and educate them… So I feel like feminists kind of give them that wake-up call that that's not the only way things can be, like you can be a dominant woman and still be feminist or you can still be feminine, you don't have to be a slave to be a female. –Gabrielle*

These responses indicate an awareness that the community is not fully accepting or equally empowering and an expectation that it should be.

Once participant shared that the SM community does not need feminism because it is free of gender inequality.

*Um, I don't necessarily know if it's needed currently. Like, I don't know if it's needed. At least, not to me cuz I guess my definition of it would be just like political and…like socio-economical equality. So I don't know if there is any gender inequality in the BDSM community, at least not that I have run in to. –Prizma*

Prizma had an overall optimistic view of the scene and fluid ideas of gender. Her responses indicated that she didn't consciously see through a gendered lens, and so considered gender irrelevant to most of her life. She is the only one who did not

acknowledge that there are still inequalities and unaccepting people in the community, like in any group of people.

**Subtheme: Race**

Most participants expressed no awareness of their race intersecting with other identities they hold. My sample was completely white, so it is not surprising to find they do not think about race. However, one participant expressed awareness of her race being unmarked, and so affecting her identities in ways she didn't realize.

> *I don't, because I'm in the majority, so we don't have to think about that. …Or maybe, if it affects it, it makes it easier for me to ignore race and spend more time thinking about the other things, whereas I'm sure any minority has to think about what that means for them. –Prizma*

A few participants expressed discomfort with racial minorities occupying the role of submissive. I think this is theoretically parallel to feminist resistance to women occupying the role of submissive.

> *…it does bother me to see African Americans in submissive roles. –Fish*

Race is relevant to consider because for some SMers, though none of my participants, it influences how they experience and understand gender power dynamics.

**Conclusions**

Overall, there are many feminist values expressed in SM and most participants express them. It is reflective of the dominant culture in that it does not yet value all roles and genders equally, but there is a consciousness in the community that this is a goal to work towards. This feminist consciousness helps create a safe space for gender transgression and a potential space for subversion of hegemony.

*Discussion*

Previous feminist analysis of SM has argued that the presence of consent is not enough to transgress the perpetuation of male dominance (Butler, "Lesbian S&M" 172). What is significant about SM is that there is more than verbal agreement. Scenes are *negotiated* so that all parties involved know what to expect, have say in what happens, and should have a pleasurable experience. Safe words are given, so individuals have the power to opt out at any time. While my results and others showed that SM often imitates and embodies normative gender roles, I argue that replaying norms does not necessarily perpetuate them. Context matters, and something more is needed to lead one to conclude that replication actually reinforces hegemony. There is something more in SM- it is a culture of consent, choice, and negotiation as well as empowerment to know and claim desires, as demonstrated in my sample- which leads one to conclude the question of "perpetuation or subversion" is much more complicated than that. Even as when my participants described taking a normatively gendered role in SM, the context of SM encourages aspects of such roles to be transgressive and always to empower individuals, even and especially when "giving up" their power through submission. However, although my participants indicated the Central PA community shows higher levels of acceptance than the dominant culture, the instances of non-acceptance and devaluing of non-normative gender roles reminds SMers that we still need to work for a more accepting subculture.

Anti-SM discourse has also expressed the sentiment that female submissives who think they have power and enjoy their role have a false consciousness. For example, one idea is that when women seek out a submissive role, their spoken "consent" is not really consent because the power dynamics embedded in culture act as

a force of coercion (Ritchie and Barker 229). However, many participants in this study expressed awareness of gender norms within SM roles. They know dominance and masculinity as well as submission and femininity are associated and that this leads some people in the community to make assumptions based on norms. They approach their scenes with awareness of the power dynamics with which they are playing. It is an intentional manipulation of power dynamics otherwise present in everyday society-but in everyday society, they often go unawares.

Further, many values encouraged in SM scenes, such as negotiation, consent, self-knowledge (knowing your desires and limits), are feminist values, especially when applied to submissive women. Most of my participants would not have described these values as feminist, even though many described feminism as a version of "woman empowerment." Such characteristics are also something that distinguish submissives in an SM context from people in the submissive role in the dominant culture and in hegemonic sexual interactions. Not only are SM submissives actively choosing their role and have the power to invert their power, but they are *encouraged* to be vocal, to articulate their desires and to know themselves. These are not things women are encouraged to do in patriarchal culture.

Overall, the participants in this study indicated an awareness of gender expectations, openness to gender non-conformity and transgression, feminist values, awareness of non-acceptance in the community, and awareness of gender norms affecting their choices in SM play. Awareness creates a context of possibility for gender subversion. However, participants did not intentionally "fuck" with gender, unlike Bauer's interviewees ("Playgrounds" 179). The feminist values in SM play, I think, make

SM empowering even and especially for female submissives.  In this way, it subverts

expectations of femininity.

The present study analyzed the experiences and understandings of SM,

feminism, and gender in a particular community- that of Central Pennsylvania- through

the lens of my own experience, the data, and pre-existing literature.  This community

was represented in ten self-selected participants.  I do not claim that the results speak

for the entire community; rather, they are a window into the context of the Central PA

SM network and, most of all, they represent the individuals' experiences who spoke

them- individuals who participate in the Central PA community and so understand their

SM experience through engagement with this particular community.  My sample

expresses more conservative views on gender than studies done in urban areas, such as

Bauer's and Ritchie and Barker's, most likely because the area is more conservative in

general, being more rural.  Despite existing in a more conservative area, the SM

subculture in Central PA has carved out a space for itself.  SMers have been able to

access communities largely through the use of social media.  Through analysis of my

sample and prior theory, I think the context provided by SM facilitates acceptance of

gender transgression and provides tools to subvert gendered norms.

Dominants were underrepresented in my sample, perhaps because submissives

are more likely to offer their time to help out.  The only SM role/gender group

represented by more than two individuals was female submissives.  Gender non-

conforming individuals exist in the Central PA SM community, but are such a small

percentage I did not have the opportunity to represent them in my research.  If my

research were to be repeated, it would be beneficial to have a bigger sample and one

with each SM role/gender group equally represented.  If this were the case, themes resulting from SM role/gender groups may emerge.

The present study was limited to individuals who had an account on a BDSM social networking site, participated in the community, and were located in Central Pennsylvania.  This assumes a number of things about participants and so limits the context in which the study can be understood.  Accounts on FetLife are free, but one must have internet access and most likely own a computer (due to the sexual nature of the site, it would be improbable that individuals regularly access it in public settings).

To participate in the Central PA community, one needs transportation to munches and/or play parties, to be even minimally involved.  This requires either living within walking distance from a munch, which generally occur in a town or city center, having a car, or knowing someone who you feel comfortable taking you to the munch.  Once at the munch, due to restaurant etiquette, you are expected to order something.  It is not in munch rules that you *must* order something, but it is considered to be polite.  Ordering food may also contribute to building community with others attending the munch.  Traveling to a restaurant and ordering food, as well as having Internet access, assumes you have the access and money to do so.  Obviously, not everyone does.  Future research on access to BDSM communities and resources would prove insightful to understanding the formation of an SM identity as well as how to provide support and education to individuals with less access.  Clearly, not everyone who may wish to participate in the community can because of such barriers as wealth, resources, and mobility.

Participants in this study have less access to BDSM communities than they would in an urban setting. Since finding like-minded people is part of the process of forming an identity around a certain desire or practice, people living in rural or non-urban areas are less likely to form a SM identity (D'Emilio 468). The Central PA community exists as a suburban or regional area, which is neither urban nor completely rural, with rural sections. Urban SM communities are more accessible. One reason is that having a car is not as crucial to participate- urban areas have public transportation and are more condensed. It would seem then that non-urban SM communities are made up of individuals in a smaller, higher range of wealth and socio-economic status than those in urban ones because of the greater requirement of means for accessibility.

Moreover, the community in Central PA is predominately white. All of the participants identified as White/Caucasian/European American. Ethnic and racial minorities in SM would likely articulate differences in their understandings of gender. Not only are their bodies racialized while white bodies remain unmarked in Western culture, but they are a minority in the SM community. Further, some SMers engage in "race play," in which racial power differences are eroticized and re-articulated. Understanding racial dynamics in SM would deepen understandings of gender, since one is not experienced independent of the other.

Future research could also look more closely at the norms of the specific community (for example, of Central PA) and compare them to the norms of the SM community within it. I'm the norms of each would be in interesting conversation with one another. Moreover, I am very interested to hear the experiences of gender non-conforming individuals in non-urban communities specifically. Few exist in Central

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PA's SM community, and I was not lucky enough to have one participate. Their perspective needs to be heard and would provide a unique narrative of gendered experiences in SM.

This study has contributed to forming a coherent, informed understanding of SM, in hopes that others will do the same before judging it. This is especially important in the current moment, when SM is showing up more often in mainstream culture and there are so many misrepresentations of it. On an ending note, the stigma against SM practices that emerged in the years of the feminist sex wars remains today, both in the dominant culture and in feminist communities. I think this is restricting to women's sexuality. Many feminists, including a couple of my participants[15] and myself, experience dissidence or tension between their feminist identity and their SM identity (Ritchie and Barker 227). In 2005, Ritchie and Barker found that "much academic literature on SM still portray[ed] it as anti-feminist" (227). I think the tension regarding SM among feminists is caused by the negative portrayal found in much of feminist literature and theory. This literature, focusing on women's role in SM, makes women feel ashamed or guilty for having BDSM-related desires and causes some to suppress their sexuality.

It is worthwhile to continue researching power dynamics in different SM communities and their relation to and distinction from the dominant culture, and understanding how they are experienced. However, I wonder: Why are questions about SM and feminism so often posed in terms of women's sexuality? The anti-SM feminists criticized the position of the submissive woman most harshly. It is rare to find critiques

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[15] Torc and Prizma, p 49. Also Fish, p.54.

of men perpetuating patriarchy via SM in academic literature regarding SM and feminism, yet women submissives are belittled for having a "false consciousness" and unknowingly perpetuating patriarchy.  This reflects discourse of the dominant culture that aims to control women's sexuality, and leads one to be weary of the consequences of questioning women's sexuality.  In this way, SM is an interesting case study in thinking about women's sexuality and agency.  Gayle Rubin and Patrick Califia both felt the effects of having their sexuality doubly repressed, in the dominant culture and in lesbian and feminist communities.  They described their "second coming out" as SM-identified as worse than their first coming out as lesbian- because they expected greater acceptance and found ostracism (Rubin, "The Leather Menace" 222; Califia 165). Moreover, the demonization of SM has had real consequences in criminalizing SM, with practitioners being arrested and kept from child custody among other things (Wright 226, 229).  I am not saying SM should not be questioned; I am saying it matters to consider the reality caused by the theory.  In fact, I think it is important to question practices, of one's own especially, to understand why they are performed as they are and what that means in context.


*Our desires can only be as sure and free as we are.[16]*

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[16] Butler, "Lesbian S&M", 173.

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Table 1: Participant Demographics

| Pseudonym | Role | Gender | Sexual Orientation | Race | Age Range | Additional Details |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Dregg* | Dominant, Master | Man | Straight | White/Caucasian/European American | 35-44 | |
| *Elisabeth* | Submissive | Woman | Straight | White/Caucasian/European American | 25-34 | |
| *Fish* | Slave | Man | Straight, Fluid | White/Caucasian/European American | 35-44 | Now pursuing role of Free Man |
| *Gabrielle* | Switch | Woman | Bisexual | White/Caucasian/European American | 18-24 | Usually submissive |
| *Jake Edwards* | Submissive, Slave, Bottom | Man | Bisexual | White/Caucasian/European American | 25-34 | |
| *MsA* | Dominant, Top, Mistress, Sadist | Woman | Straight | White/Caucasian/European American | 45-54 | Bottoms sometimes |
| *MSergeant* | Switch, Master, Sadist, Sub | Man | Straight | White/Caucasian/European American | 25-34 | In public play, only dominant spectrum |
| *Prizma* | Bottom, Submissive, Masochist | Woman | Straight | White/Caucasian/European American | 25-34 | Tops sometimes |
| *Torc* | Switch, Top, Bottom | Woman | Bisexual | White/Caucasian/European American | 25-34 | Usually bottom |
| *Winky* | Submissive | Woman | Straight | White/Caucasian/European American | 45-54 | |

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*Appendix A: Terminology and Definitions*

For the purposes of this paper, I consider a practitioner of the SM lifestyle someone who identifies as part of a SM community, participates in a D/s or M/s relationship, or personally identifies with a variant of the BDSM descriptor in relation to their romantic and/or erotic life. Participants in a D/s relationship may decide that the D/s dynamic characterizes only their sexual relationship, or that it also extends into other aspects of their relationship, such as in 24/7 relationships or "Total Power Exchange" (Dancer, Kleinplatz, and Moser 82-83). For example, the dominant(s) may decide what the submissive(s) wear(s) every day (84). The D/s dynamic may exist in different frequencies from relationship to relationship, from every so often in place of "vanilla" sex to almost all the time and everywhere.

I will use BDSM and SM interchangeably to refer to the community. Both terms are used in scholarly literature as well as in the community. I will use "SM" most often, but as shorthand for BDSM rather than to mean only "sadomasochism." BDSM is more inclusive than sadomasochism in the types of activity is describes and is more accessible to participants who feel excluded from the term "sadomasochism." I will also use "SMers" and "SM practitioners" interchangeably to refer to people who claim an SM identity. Using both terms allows for inclusivity of how people understand their SM identity, since some understand SM predominantly as an identity while others understand it as a practice in which they engage ("Situating Sadomasochism" 7).

24/7 relationship: A relationship in which a D/s or M/s dynamic is followed at all times.

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BDSM: an acronym that stands for bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, and sadism/masochism or sadomasochism. It is a practice, identity, and community that centers on the eroticization of power dynamics.

BDSM Practitioners: people who participate in BDSM practices and identify with SM.

D/s relationship- Dominant/submissive relationship: a relationship in which power dynamics create dominant and submissive roles and are negotiated and made explicit to participants in the relationship. The "s" is usually lower-cased while the "D" is upper-cased to emphasize the power differential.

Dominant, Sadist, or Top: these terms, while not mutually exclusive, all refer to the person in the role of having and exerting power and/or administering sensation (s).

Domme: woman-identified dominant

Kink: another term referring to the practices of BDSM, e.g. "Your kink is not my kink."

Kinky: describes something as being related to or involved in BDSM, e.g. a "kinky person", the "kinky community," or "kinky sex."

Leather: a blanket term for "sexual preferences, identities, relationship structures, and social organizations loosely tied together by… sadomasochistic sex" (Johnson 1). However, the leather community is distinguished from the SM community because it has an independent history from which it developed symbols, roles, and guidelines distinct from the SM subculture (Mosher 105).

M/s relationship- Master/slave or Mistress/slave relationship: Generally a more intense version of a D/s relationship. Often times, a slave is "collared" as a symbol of commitment and ownership between the Master/Mistress and the slave.

Munch: meeting for SM people, typically held in a restaurant, for casual conversation and to get to know other people in the community.  It comes from the phrase "meeting for lunch."  Munches are extremely common and widespread in the community.

Play: BDSM activities.  "Play parties" are parties where people in the community may engage in BDSM activities (or "play") with each other. Play is often considered by the community to be less serious and intense.

S/M: Sadism/masochism.  The slash indicates that they are separate concepts, in contrast to "SM" which indicates they are inextricably connected.  Also used to refer to BDSM in academic literature as well as in the community.

S&M: Sadism and masochism. Their separation by an "&"/and also communicates the terms as individual concepts.  Also substituted for BDSM in academic literature as well as in the community.

SM: Sadomasochism.  Combining sadism and masochism into one word is understood to indicate interconnectedness between sadism and masochism, an understanding that you cannot have one without the other. "SM" is the term most commonly used in academic literature to refer to BDSM practices, communities, and identities.  It is also used within the community.

SMers: people who claim an SM identity and see it primarily as an identity rather than a practice.

Scene: "The scene" refers to the public activities of the BDSM community including munches, play parties, clubs, and other events.  A "scene" is an SM act that happens during a fixed time frame and is negotiated and planned beforehand.

Submissive, Masochist, or Bottom: these terms, while not mutually exclusive, refer to the person in the role that gives up power and/or receives sensation.

Switch: an SM role referring to someone who takes on the dominant/top and submissive/bottom roles at some point.

Total Power Exchange (TPE): Another way to refer to a 24/7 relationship. In a TPE relationship, the submissive has given complete power to the person in the dominant role.

Vanilla: commonly used in the kink community to refer to people, activities, or relationships that do not involve BDSM; e.g. "vanilla sex" is "non-BDSM sex."

*Appendix B: Questionnaire*

Your answers will help me to learn about your BDSM identification and activity level and to select individuals for follow up interviews.

1. I am at least 18 years of age □*

*If this box is not checked, please do not continue the questionnaire. If you submit it without checking this box, I will not use the data herein.

2. What is your sexual orientation? Please circle or highlight all that apply.

-Straight –Gay –Lesbian –Bisexual –Pansexual –Queer –Fluid –Asexual –Questioning – Other: ___

3. As what gender do you identify?

-Man –Woman –Genderqueer –Transgender woman –Transgender man –Other:___

4. What is your racial identity/ethnicity?

- European American/Caucasian/White –African American/African/Black

-Hispanic/Latino –Asian American/ Asian/Pacific Islander –Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native –Middle Eastern/Persian/Arab American -Other:___

5. What is your religious or spiritual orientation? (For example, Methodist, Wiccan, Spiritual but not religious, etc.).

6. How important is it to you?

-Extremely Important  –Somewhat Important  –Neutral  –Somewhat Unimportant  – Extremely unimportant

7. Age (please circle/highlight)

-18-24  -25-34  -35-44  -45-54  -55-64  -65 and over

8. Annual household income: -$25K  -$25K-$50K  -$50K-$75K  -$75K-$100K  -$100K-$125K  -$125K-$150K  - >$150K

9. What is the highest level of formal education you have completed?

-High School Diploma –GED –Some college –Bachelor's Degree –Master's Degree –Some graduate school –Doctoral degree (Ph.D., M.D., J.D.) –Other:___

10. What S/M role do you identify with? Select all that apply:

-Top –Bottom –Dominant –Submissive –Master -Mistress –Slave –Sadist –Masochist –

Switch –Sadomasochist –Other:_____

11. How much do you enjoy being the dominant partner (or top) in BDSM scenes?

1 not very much       2       3       4       5 very much

12. How much do you enjoy being the submissive partner (or bottom) in BDSM scenes?

 1 not very much       2       3       4       5 very much

13. What is your BDSM role experience?  Select one:

   Always dominant, never submissive

   Mostly dominant, rarely submissive

   Usually dominant, sometimes submissive

   Equally dominant and submissive

   Usually submissive, sometimes dominant

   Mostly submissive, rarely dominant

   Always submissive, never dominant

14.  If you were forced to choose one or the other, would you (circle one):

   Always be              ~or~           Always be

   Dominant                              submissive

15.  Generally, how often do you engage in BDSM?

1 never        2       3       4       5 all the time


Please select a pseudonym that I will use to match your questionnaire to your upcoming interview.  You may pick one so that you can identify yourself in my final paper.  This pseudonym will never be linked to your real name: _____

*Appendix C: Informed Consent, Interview Questions, and Debriefing*

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me. Will you be comfortable answering questions here? Ok, you have already received a consent form outlining the nature of the study. Do you have any questions about it?

You can withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time and you can decline to respond to any items you don't want to answer. I want to remind you that this interview will be transcribed, then deleted from the recording device, and only identified by a pseudonym. I won't be reporting any information that will identify participants.

Just so I have a record of this, do you consent to participate in this interview?

And do you consent to the audio recording of the interview?

Finally, so that I can match up the interview with your written responses to the questionnaire, what was the pseudonym you used on the questionnaire that you got in your email? (If they did not self-assign a pseudonym: "The pseudonym I have assigned you is _____.")

1. Do you consider yourself part of a kink or BDSM community?

2. How active are you in the lifestyle? Are you in a D/s or M/slave relationship?

3. When did you first encounter a BDSM community? How did it change your relationship to it?

4. In what ways do you view BDSM as a practice? In what ways do you view it as an identity?

5. To what degree have you come out as kinky or into BDSM?

6. What first attracted you to BDSM? Please describe the reasons why you first became interested in BDSM.

7. Have you been continuously involved in BDSM, or have there been times you weren't active in the lifestyle, in the community or your personal life?

8. Does your BDSM identity have any similarities to your identity outside the BDSM community and D/s relationships?

8a. (follow-up). How do you see your BDSM practice fitting into your life?  How is it a part of your life as a whole?  A part of your sex life?  How is the rest of your life affected, if at all, by being into BDSM?

9. What characteristics do you associate with dominance? What makes someone a dominant?

10. What characteristics do you associate with submissiveness? What makes someone a submissive?

11. What characteristics do you think exemplify masculinity? Personality traits?

12. What characteristics do you think exemplify femininity? Personality traits?

13. Is that what you think masculinity and femininity are, or how you think they are defined by society?

14. Do you play with men? With women?  Can you compare and contrast those experiences for me?

15. How do you feel about gender non-conformity, such as men who are not typically masculine?

16. Some people say they like to "play with gender" in scenes, doing things like cross-dressing.  Do you play with gender in a BDSM context?

17. Do you think gender plays a role in the power dynamics of your BDSM scenes?

17a. How does gender affect how you play with power dynamics in your BDSM scenes, or does it?

17b. (If they say gender is irrelevant and they play with single gender) Why do you only play with men/women?

18. Do you think being masculine/feminine affects your SM identity? If so, how?

19.  Do you think your race affects your SM identity?  If so, how?

20.  Do you think your race affects your gender identity?  If so, how?

21. Have you ever played with someone of a different racial background?

21a. (If no) Why not?

22. Do you see BDSM as breaking down norms? How so, and what does that mean to you?

23. How do you think stereotypical gender roles are rejected in the BDSM community? How do you think they are upheld?

22a. Why do you think traditional norms are rejected in the community?  Why do you think they are upheld?

24. Do you feel more comfortable exploring gender or expressing your gender identity within the kink community, or does it make a difference to you?

25. Can you remind me whether you identify as top, bottom, or switch?  In the survey, I asked questions about your BDSM roles, but wanted you to be able to elaborate if you wanted.  You identified as [insert selected terms].  Is there anything else you want to tell me about your BDSM role that was not covered in those questions?

For example, are you dominant when you play with men but submissive with women, or vice versa?  Are there specific situations in which you are dominant but others in which you are submissive?  With certain people?  Are you interested in trying out a different role than you usually take?

26.  How do you express your dominance or submission in a scene?

If you consider yourself to be a dominant, sadist, or top, please explain what you find erotic about your role.  What do you enjoy about being dominant?  What do you find arousing about a partner's submission?

If you consider yourself to be a submissive, masochist, or bottom, please explain what you find erotic about your role.  What do you enjoy about being submissive?  What do you find arousing about a partner's dominance?

27.  People define feminism in a number of different ways.  Some people think it means equality between men and women, some see it as a radical questioning of the patriarchy, some see it as an activism to end all oppressions.  So, do you think feminism (or women's liberation) has any role in the BDSM community? What do you think its role is?

28.  What does feminism mean to you? Do you identify as a feminist? If so, how does that affect your SM identity?

29.  Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?  Anything else you think I should know?

As you know, I will be placing my final paper in the Leather Archives and Museum's in Chicago three years after completion of the paper, where it will be made available to researchers, writers and scholars.  The purpose of this archiving is to help grow the

BDSM history and make my work accessible to other researchers and writers so they can use them if it will aid their work.  Anonymous, individual interview transcripts can also be archived along with my paper, so other researchers can draw analyses from them, however, it is not necessary for all interview transcripts to be archived.  Would you like your transcript to be included in this archive?

If you know anyone else who would be interested in being interviewed, please feel free to bring them a copy of the consent form (hand to them), which has my email address and the information about the study.  If you'd like a copy of my final paper, I will provide one to you.  Thank you so much for your time.

*Appendix D: Themes*

| Theme | Subtheme | Code | Subcode |
|---|---|---|---|
| Upholds Gender Norms | Not subversive | | |
| | Male subs as feminine | | |
| | Gender matters | | |
| | | Because of sex or erotic element | |
| | Feminine cross-dressing as humiliation | | |
| | Female doms taken less seriously | | |
| | Female doms as masculine | | |
| | SM not safer or less safe/accepting | | |
| | Encourages normative gender performance | | |
| | Reflects Gender Stereotypes | | |
| | | Play with women | |
| | | Play with men | |
| | | Femininity | |
| | | Masculinity | |
| Rejects Gender Norms | | | |
| | Female doms as feminine | | |
| | Gender understood as fluid | | |
| | Gender irrelevant | | |
| | SM as genderless | | |
| | SM safe space/More accepting | | |
| | Reflects but does not reinforce | | |
| | SM as subversive | | |
| | Does not reflect gender stereotypes | | |
| | | Play with women | |
| | | Play with men | |
| | | Femininity | |
| | | Masculinity | |
| Context | | | |
| | Pleasure | | |
| | Community/Network | | |
| | Understandings of Power | | |
| | | Dom has power | |
| | | Sub has Power | |
| | Origin Narratives | | |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Constructed or learned identity | |
| | | | Performance |
| | | Essential Identity | |
| | SM roles | | |
| | | SM identity reflective of everyday personality | |
| | | SM identity not reflective of everyday personality | |
| | | Sub and dom have same core characteristics | |
| | | Submission | |
| | | Dominance | |
| | Explore self thru SM | | |
| | SM as transgressive | | |
| | | Not transgressive | |
| | SM strengthens relationship | | |
| | Support Resource | | |
| | Educational Resource | | |
| | Escape | | |
| | Consent, communication and negotiation | | |
| | | Trust | |
| | Distinct from reality | | |
| | | Not distinct | |
| Feminist Identity | | | |
| | SM as feminist | | |
| | | Sub Empowered, Vocal, and Knows Self | |
| | | Choice | |
| | | Empowers | |
| | | Equal Power | |
| | | Feminism's Role | |
| | | | Empower |
| | | | Educate |
| | | | No Role |
| | Not Feminist | | |
| | Race | | |