

PARAPHILIAS

Is Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, and Sadomasochism Recreational Leisure? A Descriptive Exploratory Investigation



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Recent studies have suggested that, in contrast to traditional psychopathologic explanations, bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism (BDSM) could be understood as recreational leisure. However, the theoretical framing of BDSM as potential leisure has not been empirically explored.

Aim: To conduct an initial empirical exploration to determine whether BDSM experience fits established characteristics of recreational leisure.

Methods: A convenience sample of BDSM participants (N = 935) completed an online survey (9 demographic questions and 17 leisure questions) that assessed BDSM experience according to important attributes of leisure. Responses also were assessed and statistically compared as being primarily casual or serious leisure according to general BDSM identities (ie, dominants vs submissives vs switches).

Main Outcome Measures: BDSM experiences were assessed as a form of potential leisure.

Results: Most BDSM experiences met leisure criteria. Participants reported that “most of the time or nearly always” BDSM was associated with a sense of personal freedom (89.7% of participants), pleasure or enjoyment (98.5%), sense of adventure (90.7%), use of personal skills (90.8%), relaxation or decreased stress (91.4%), self-expression or exploration (90.6%), and positive emotions (96.6%). BDSM seemed to function as primarily serious, rather than casual, leisure, but important statistical differences were observed based on specific BDSM identities.

Conclusion: A leisure science perspective could be valuable to researchers and clinicians in reinterpreting the wide range of diverse BDSM motivations and practices.

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INTRODUCTION

Large reviews of an accumulating scientific literature have suggested that consensual participation in bondage, dominance and submission, and sadomasochism (BDSM) generally is not associated with an underlying psychopathology.^{1–3} In fact, a few recent studies have suggested that BDSM participation might provide important psychological and social benefits, such

as feelings of pleasure or enjoyment, fun, an escape from the demands of everyday life, personal growth, improved relationships, and self-expression.^{4,5} Although BDSM is often assumed to be motivated by sexual interests, the broad range and complexity of specific practices encompassed within BDSM (ie, spanking or whipping, bondage, specific sensory stimulation, sensory deprivation or overload, fisting, humiliation, and roleplay) point to the likelihood that some practices are not necessarily experienced as directly sexual for some participants. Interestingly, one recent study reported that some asexual people form relationships through BDSM participation, which might help them establish strong emotional connections that are not motivated by sexual desire.⁶ Furthermore, BDSM participation often is understood first and foremost as “playing with power” rather than being necessarily sexual.⁷ In short, although a sexual science approach clearly applies to understanding BDSM, a broader complementary

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perspective also might be needed, particularly in understanding the motivation for BDSM activities that are not experienced by some participants as particularly erotic or sexual.

The authors of a recent quasi-experimental study on psychological characteristics of BDSM practitioners that was published in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine* concluded that, given their findings on the psychological health of participants, BDSM could be understood as recreational leisure.⁸ This suggestion is consistent with other studies that have reported psychological and social benefits associated with BDSM.^{4,5} However, apart from a couple of notable exceptions,^{9,10} BDSM has not been explored through the disciplinary or theoretical lens of leisure science. Leisure science is a small distinct field of study with roots in sociology and social psychology. Although a precise definition of leisure experience remains elusive and leisure can be conceptualized as activity, time, or setting, scholars agree that leisure is freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, personally meaningful, and associated with significant psychological benefits.¹¹ Specific leisure activities can be classified on a continuum from casual (playful, spontaneous, and natural) to serious (requiring continual effort, perseverance, and skills; is associated with a specific identity; has a unique ethos; and provides rewards), and leisure can be further assessed as legitimate or deviant.^{9,12} Although most leisure activities are non-sexual, scholars acknowledge that sexual behaviors sometimes qualify as leisure.¹³ Given (i) the nature of leisure as a field of study and the properties of leisure experience in general, (ii) findings from recent BDSM studies, and (iii) the common use of terms such as *play*, *toys*, *games*, and *fantasy* in BDSM communities, the purpose of the present empirical study was to explore whether BDSM experiences could be understood as leisure. A leisure framework would apply to a vast range of BDSM experiences that are sexual and non-sexual for participants.

The primary research question for this study was, Are there established characteristics of general leisure experience in BDSM? A secondary question, based on results of the primary question, was, If BDSM seems to function as a form of recreational leisure, is it primarily serious or casual leisure? In addition, if BDSM is leisure, are there statistical differences in whether BDSM experience reflects casual or serious leisure based on BDSM identities (ie, dominants vs submissives vs switches). Consistent with findings from a recent qualitative research study,¹⁰ we hypothesized that BDSM experience likely would be skewed as serious leisure for all participants, but there would be significant statistical differences in how dominants, switches, and submissives experience leisure in intensity from casual to serious leisure. Because dominants administer and largely control BDSM activities, we expected these identities to reflect a greater degree of serious leisure attributes.

METHODS

Before data collection using an online survey, this study was approved by the institutional review boards of the principal

investigator's university and the Community Academic Consortium for Research on Alternative Sexualities, which formally endorsed this project. Participants were recruited through online associations with the Community Academic Consortium for Research on Alternative Sexualities, the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, and the Woodhull Sexual Freedom Alliance. Web sites and social media outlets from these organizations posted links to the survey for 4 months, from July 2014 through October 2014. Potential participants were adults (≥ 18 years old) who regularly practiced consensual BDSM. In total, 935 participants completed all or most of the online survey.

Participants

Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 78 years (mean = 35 years). Most (88%) reported their ethnicity to be white or Caucasian, and 62% of the total sample reported having a college education (at least a bachelor's degree). Length of engagement in BDSM ranged from less than 1 year (27 participants) to more than 30 years (43 respondents). More than half the participants (52%) reported engaging in BDSM at least once per week.

Additional demographic questions ($n = 919$) showed that 293 participants identified as men or cis-men; 561 identified as women or cis-women; 50 identified as queer, gender-queer, or gender-fluid; and 15 identified as transgender. Reported BDSM identities were grouped into general categories of dominant, submissive, switch, sadomasochist, or other. Of men, 42% identified as dominant, 25% as submissive, 25% as switch, and 6% as sadomasochist; of women, 9% identified as dominant, 57% as submissive, 23% as switch, and 5% as sadomasochist. Of queer participants, 27% identified as dominant, 22% as submissive, 37% as switch, and 14% as sadomasochist. Of transgender participants, 20% identified as dominant, 27% as submissive, 27% as switch, and 20% as sadomasochist.

Instrumentation and Procedure

An online survey was constructed that included demographic questions, 10 general leisure questions to assess important properties of general leisure, and 6 questions to assess serious vs casual leisure. General leisure questions originally were derived from established properties of leisure that were identified and summarized in the leisure science literature and subsequently reviewed independently by two senior leisure scholars. These basic questions (modified for the specific relevant activity) have been used in research elsewhere.¹⁴ Serious leisure questions were based on the six criteria of serious leisure originally developed by Stebbins.¹² General leisure and serious leisure questions involve participants rating their level of agreement based on a Likert scale. Because leisure activities can be viewed on a continuum of casual to serious leisure, low scores on dimensions of serious leisure indicate higher properties of casual leisure and vice-versa. Leisure and serious leisure survey items and results are presented in Table 1. Participants were recruited through the Community Academic Consortium for Research on Alternative Sexualities,

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