

BDSM: WHAT IS THAT?
SEEKING A DEFINITION TO THE MIS/UNDEFINED

By

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ABSTRACT

The world of whips and chains has a growing presence in today's society. Peoples' curiosity and opinions grow with media exposure, however being able to state what Bondage/Discipline/Domination/Submission/Slave/Master/Sadomasochism (BDSM) is, is still a challenge – a challenge to both community and research. It is a challenge that can lead to misunderstandings and negative impressions. There is currently no agreed upon definition of what is BDSM; however, with a review of literature a definition could be developed that address gaps and conflicts in current literature. A definition is the starting ground to combat misunderstandings and begin cultural research. This paper attempts to develop a definition of BDSM that is appropriate for future research by looking at existing literature on North American BDSM, integrating key conceptual information found, such as: power differentials; explicit consent sensual arousal; deviancy; and theatricality. The newly derived definition is associated with the roles of cultural norms, evaluating its strength and validity.

References to the world of Bondage/Discipline/Domination/Submission/Slave/Master/Sadomasochism (BDSM) have been growing in the public eye due to increased use in popular media and becoming a central theme in popular literature. BDSM refers to a group of like-minded people who participate in activities of power exchange, bondage (physical, emotional, and mental), discipline with full consent, and may be associated with finding enjoyment in consensual sadomasochism activities. However, the understanding of BDSM is unclear and often contested by scholars and participants, leading to misunderstandings and possible negative perceptions.

The dissonance in BDSM understanding leads to the central question of this paper: What are the unifying norms and roles of the BDSM culture in North America. Furthermore, through an interdisciplinary investigation of current research a working definition of BDSM can be created. By gathering and analyzing current literature the various opinions, theories and knowledge about BDSM participants and culture can be organized to discover new knowledge and understandings. The definition will be developed by two means. First, taking the various assumptions and concepts presented by a multitude of disciplines and organize the discovered commonalities to establish a core relation of information. Second, focusing on the conflicting concepts and generate common ground by adjusting the core inconsistent assumptions to form a complementary stance and rework the semantics of concepts to become akin.

The term sadomasochism (SM) was first coined by Freud in 1905 in connection with psychopathology. It is based on the relationship and interactions of the terms sadism and masochism. These terms emerged at the end of the 19th century within the medical and psychiatric fields, but were derived by combining the names of authors de Sade

(1740-1814) and Sacher-masoch (1836-1895) (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). Freud viewed sadism as the displacement of an aggressive sexual instinct that has become exaggerated. He viewed masochism as a perversion and the sexual objectification of one's personhood (Freud, 1938). In the past 100 years, literature on SM desires and actions have been viewed by psychologists as pathological (Butler, 1982; Charne, 1983; Ehm & Patrick, 1995; Freud, 1900/1954/1924/1961; Gratzner & Bradford, 1995; Kraft-ebing, 1886/1965; Price, 1983).

Some research in the past few decades, such as that by Taylor & Ussher, Wineberg and Newmahr, changed the focus of SM to being considered a sociological phenomena with a vibrant subculture. More recent research has focused on the socialization of SM; characteristics of participants, the social organization of SM communities, the function of related cultures and organizations, the associated cultural norms and values, and investigation into SM play and practices (Beckmann, 2009; Butts, 2007; Cross & Matheson, 2006; Kleiplatz, 2006; Kleiplatz & Moser, 2006; Moser & Levitt, 1987; Newmahr, 2008/2011; Plate, 2006; Sandnabba, 2002; Taylor & Ussherr, 2001; Thompson, 1994; Williams, 2006; Weinberg, 2006). However, such research is still sparse, inhibited by limited population access and biases of associated cultural stigma. The most recent literature and research follows traditional pathological conclusions, looking towards the community and culture as a potential source of knowledge and information (Butts, 2007; Cross & Matheson, 2006; Kleiplatz, 2006; Williams, 2006).

The contemporary understanding of BDSM culture is built upon more recent research. However, within these more contemporary understandings and perspectives is

great dissonance and debate related to defining the substance of 'BDSM'. Researchers and participants lack consensus on the definition 'BDSM,' lumping a wide variety of activities together and using labels of convenience that may or may not fit (Hopper, 2011; Newmahr, 2010). These simplified definitions "risk bias in our understanding by, in effect, invalidating participants' experience failing to understand what the culture truly represents" (Hopper, 2011:18). Before the research on this subject can expand, it is required to define BDSM such that it addresses the existing conflicts and gaps that render it more difficult to define. Using an interdisciplinary approach to provide a wider view of this unique culture gives structure to an appropriate definition for researchers and involved participants to agree upon. Having such a definition can lead to greater mainstream societal understanding and may assist in learning from this misunderstood 'deviant' community.

Members of the BDSM community often have productive and functional lives, even if their other non-BDSM life roles conflict with their full participation and identified self within the BDSM subculture. Rather than a form of pathological disturbance or delinquency as previous definitions have outlined, identification within the BDSM subculture can be viewed as a productive element in the formation of an individual's identity. A multidisciplinary structured definition provides a foundation for future research, ability to address current misunderstandings and negatively held perceptions, and provide insight into the ways in which involvement in the BDSM culture can be a source of personal growth. This view posits that membership in the BDSM community can lead individuals on a journey that is intrinsically and phenomenally rewarding (Newmahr: 2008, 2011).

Before trying to define BDSM, an understanding of key aspects of the culture is required. There is no commonly accepted definition of what constitutes BDSM. It has been associated with a broad variety of behaviours and activities -- a challenge to define and fully encompass as it typically has multiple meanings and multifarious participant experiences. The terminology and related activities are diverse and hotly debated.

The initialism of BDSM, refers to a variety of things, including but not limited to: Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Submission, Sadism, Masochism, Master and Slave. Wiseman (1996) defines BDSM as “the use of psychological dominance and submission and/or physical bondage and/or pain, and/or related practices in a safe, legal, consensual manner in order for participants to experience erotic arousal and/or personal growth.”(p.10) The term may also be separated into B&D, D/s, S/M, M/s and S&M. The *Deviant Dictionary* defines BD as Bondage & Discipline, sometimes used interchangeably with SM but more strictly referring to practices involving bondage and role-playing or humiliation but does not necessarily involving pain. Sometimes thought to stand for bondage and domination. (BD, “n.d.”). While the term SM or S+M most often is a reference to sadomasochism, it occasionally refers to slave/Master or Mistress relationships, in which case it is most often written as M/s.

With all the variations and differing opinions on what the initialism of BDSM references, it is clear that:

SM is multifaceted, its expression takes a variety of forms along a number of continuums, it is credited with differing degrees of importance and it is expressed within widely different interpersonal contexts. As one participant responded when asked for a definition: it’s not something I would care to define

in less than several thousand words... nor is it something I pretend to 100 percent understand. (*Taylor and Usher, 2001, p. 302*)

Today's traditional definitions that label BDSM participants as pathological and/or deviant are highly contested. Expanding on the definition of pathological to include the notion of deviancy, earlier definitions of BDSM could refer to participants being outside the socialized norms and prescribed sexual scripts of society. The language associated to the BDSM culture reflects this with a sense of pride in being a social outlier (Surprise, 2012). For example, the word *vanilla* (a reference to the plainest ice cream flavour) refers to people who are within the accepted socio-sexual norm and therefore boring and conventional, not a part of a BDSM community. The term vanilla designates people as separate from the BDSM community, therefore the BDSM community can identify themselves from within as more interesting and unconventional, which permits social deviants to embrace and even celebrate their non-vanilla status once it is obtained.

Even beyond the vanilla societal expectations, social variation within the BDSM community is pronounced. To gain greater understanding, a picture of common demographics of the culture is required. "This subculture cuts across most, if not all, cultural and subcultural boundaries, sexual sadomasochists are homosexuals, heterosexuals, or bisexual coming from a variety of social, economic, racial, ethnic, geographic, and religious backgrounds" (Beckmann, 2009, p.102). However, within all this diversity, research has shown some defining or at least common characteristics amongst the population. The most prominent being: higher levels of income and education (Cross & Matheson, 2006; Newmahr, 2008, Sandnabba et al, 1999/2002); awareness of interest in late teen/early 20s (Weingberg, 2006; Breslow 1985; Moser &

Levitt 1987); and higher levels of sexual activity, exploration, and broader sexual experiences (Cross & Matheson, 2006).

Sandnabba's (1999) study found that BDSM participants "had statistically significant higher levels of education and income than general population" (p.42) and most held prominent positions at work and involvement in community service. These are indications of functioning well overall in broader society. Newmahr (2011) found some interesting deviations from mainstream norms, including: higher obesity levels, gender nonconformity (not to be confused with gender bending), and outsider experiences that extend beyond BDSM participation. All in all, the cultural demographic is diverse and fits with societally defined ideas of success. (Baumeister, 1991).

In this way 'deviance' is not associated with the definition of delinquency and inability to contribute to society, but rather with an intentional choice to not participate in accepted sexual scripts and norms. These participants choose to take part in a theatricalized subculture with values and norms that lie outside the mainstream vanilla culture without interfering with their ability to be 'productive' members of society. The element of delinquency can therefore be addressed with this expanded definition and BDSM can be defined as a distinct culture that holds a set of norms and values that differ from those in mainstream society.

Some of the earliest elements that were highlighted by BDSM researchers included pain and sexual culture. Weinberg (2006) states, "definitions of sadomasochism that focus exclusively on pain miss the essence of SM, the ritualization of dominance and submission. SMers often consider their behaviour to be a power exchange." (p.33) Exclusively is the key element of Weinburg's statement. Although an exclusive

understanding of BDSM based on pain and sex has been presented in early research, it lacks depth and is incomplete (Cross & Matheson, 2006; Taylor & Ussher, 2001; Weinberg, 2006). However, these elements can still be a part of the definition as they are a prominent part of related cultural activities. In recent literature, Weinburg posits that the fundamental role of power differentials and exchange is a prominent element in defining BDSM (Beckmann, 2009; Cross & Matheson, 2006; Newmahr, 2008; Taylor & Ussher, 2001; Weinberg, 2006).

Until recently, researchers have overlooked power exchange, but many in the community consider this element as essential, showing greater significance than was once associated with traditional theories (Cross & Matheson, 2006; Taylor & Ussher, 2001; Weinberg, 2006). Newmahr (2011) refers to BDSM as “the collection of activities that involve the mutually consensual and conscious use, among two or more people, of pain, power, perceptions about power, or any combination thereof, psychological, emotional, or sensory enjoyment.” (p.684) Newmahr’s definition is missing the element of deviancy, but directly includes pain, which cultural importance is debated. The understanding of sex, eroticism, pain, power, or the redefinition of these terms may be central to creating an integrated definition for BDSM.

Thus, discussion of what is included in a definition of BDSM so far requires the central concepts of being an outsider, power differentials, eroticism, and forms of pain. In addition, many contemporary authors have discussed the theatrical nature of BDSM interactions and lifestyle structures (Surprise, 2012; Hooper, 2011; Meeker, 2011; Yost & Hunter, 2012), seen through the use of language in the BDSM community’s culture. The key word, “play,” refers to BDSM interactions, and is used both as a verb and noun.

“Scene” refers to both the community at large, but also refer to a specific individual play session. “Toys” are referred to as objects used within play, and can include whips, floggers, clamps, corsets, and remote control vibrators (see image 2). Surprise (2012) states that:

BDSM participants are aware of the theatre involved, of the temporary nature of the roles they take and perform. The result of taking on such roles, the symptom and the cause, is explicit discussion of power and agency in regard to sexuality and relationship standards. (p.57)

Clearly, the theatrical nature of the activities must contribute to any developing definition of BDSM.

The importance and value placed on consent and communication between participants contributes to the multifaceted world of BDSM, especially in scenarios of play (Beckmann, 2009; Cross & Matheson, 2006; Hooper, 2011; Newmahr, 2008; Meeker, 2012; Surprise, 2012; Taylor & Ussher, 2001; Weinberg, 2006). In the BDSM lifestyle, community, or identity, there is great emphasis on consent and safety as cornerstones of BDSM culture. Models of sexual consent and the sexual scripts are based on communication, explicit consent and openness. “To conceive of BDSM consent as separate from BDSM community, BDSM identity, and from the gatekeeping and rule enforcement, is to view an incomplete picture.” (Surprise, 2012, p.124)

In review of current research, the tables below constitute a brief overview of central concepts relating to the core values and ideas associated with any BDSM definition. Table 1 describes a variety of approaches when breaking down the BDSM

initials for the sake of literal and community-described definitions. Table 2 looks at a variety of written concepts that have been associated with a BDSM definition.

Table 1

Author	Acronym Breakdown of BDSM	Unique Element
Federoff, 2008 and early research	No BDSM ... sadomasochism	Only addresses desire of pain
Meeker, 2012	Bondage + Discipline; Domination + Submission; Sadism + Masochism; Sadomasochism	Elements are grouped together
Surprise, 2012	Bondage, discipline, domination, submission, sadism, masochism	Does not include sadomasochism and elements are presented individually
Hooper, 2011	D+S (dominance and submission); B+D (bondage and discipline); S+M (sadism and masochism) No BDSM	BDSM is not a proper term but a lump acronym representing many distinct subcultures
Cross, P. & Matheson, K. (2006)	Bondage, discipline, domination, submission, sadism, masochism, slave, master	Inclusion of slave & master, i.e. role elements

Table 2

Author (s)	Central concept discussed	Additional elements to note
Surprise, 2012 Williams, 2006	Sexual; arousal; erotic expression	Power; egalitarian ideals; theatrical; consensual
Beckman, 2007 Kleinplatz, 2004	Spiritual; Transformative	Couples are extraordinary lovers with great trust that rest of society can learn from
Newhmar, 2011 & 2009	Power exchange	Psychological, sensory & emotional enjoyment; risk taking (similar to extreme sports participation)
Meeker, 2012	Communication & Trust	Educational focus; sexual; power exchange; sensual arousal; description of multiple subcultures (rainbow of members)
Taylor & Usher, 2011	Multifaceted & not definable	Pleasure; escapism; dissidence
Wiseman	Consent (and safety)	Erotic; personal growth/transformative
Early research	Deviant	Medical disease

With reference to tables 1 and 2, and reviewing the discussion thus far, the following terms have been considered and analyzed for integration into a definition: deviancy, power exchange, sexual pleasure, pain, theatricality, consent, communication, and trust. Conceptually, deviancy presents BDSM as a distinct culture with norms and values that lie outside mainstream society, rather than its mainstream definition of vagrant activities. It is generally agreed that power-exchange and power differential are core elements to BDSM and relate to associated subcultures of D/s (domination and submission) with elements of theatricality (role playing, appearance of being dominant and submissive through mutual definition). In this sense, BDSM is a culture, lifestyle and identity, centered on its members exchanging power differentials.

The involvement or requirement to include concepts relating to sexual pleasure and pain is more highly debated. In this context, elements of sex can be thought-of as physical arousal, which can include sexual experiences along with other components that related to physical stimulus. For example, physical can be associated with the experienced of pain as the source of arousal and stimulus. The word 'arousal' (as preferable over 'sex') is more appropriate in this definition. Other experiences or arousals in BDSM include possible spiritual growth, emotional benefits, and mental growth (Beckmann, 2009; Cross & Matheson, 2006; Cross & Stiles, 2006; Kleinplatz, 2006; Newmahr, 2008; Taylor & Ussher, 2001; Weinberg, 2006). A definition of BDSM should therefore include sensual arousal (physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual) to address all these arousal elements. Pain can also be used as a tool of power exchange; it therefore does not need to be explicitly included in the definition. With expanding sexual arousal to

sensual arousal, sexuality is included as a part of the culture without making it an explicit part of the definition. It also incorporates non-sexual outcomes of community interaction and involvement discussed in current research (Beckmann, 2009; Cross & Matheson, 2006; Cross & Stiles, 2006; Kleinplatz, 2006; Newmahr, 2008; Taylor & Ussher, 2001; Weinberg, 2006).

To recap, the essential elements of BDSM include: deviancy, power differentials, consentuality, sensual arousal, theatricality, and variation in levels of participation. These components can now be used as the basis of a definition:

BDSM is a culture, community, lifestyle, and identity. The initialism refers to many concepts, including Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Submission, Sadism, Masochism, Sadoomasochism, and related subcultures of D/s, B&D, and SM. BDSM is a distinct culture that holds a set of norms and values that differ from those of mainstream society, with varying levels of participation. It is focused on consensual power differentials and arousal in a theatricalized context, maintained through a wide variety of tools and activities, structured around consent, openness, communication, trust, and safety.

To further the investigation of this definition, a review of the cultural roles, norms, and values follows.

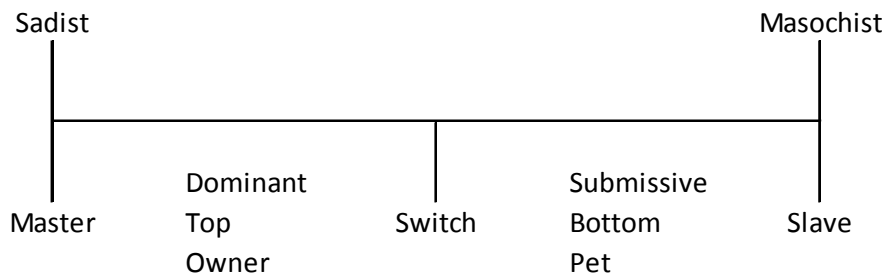
The list of roles within BDSM continues to grow and change while the boundaries between increasingly blur. Individuals who identify with being members of the BDSM culture are no longer either a Master or a slave, but relate to a spectrum

of titles/roles including, but not limited to: master, slave, top, bottom, dom/dominant, sub/submissive, kinkster, fetishist, and switch. Fetlife, a popular BDSM social network site (similar to Facebook for those who self-identify as members of the BDSM or kink community), allows individuals to define themselves within the BDSM community from the aforementioned list along with highly varied options to describe their levels of involvement and types of relationship structures.

One might identify as a master or mistress, maintaining a permanent role over a slave, or as the aforementioned slave; as a dominant person who occasionally tops (directs the actions of) another person, or as the bottom to that top. One might identify as a slave who tops, as a dominant who enjoys receiving pain (masochist), as a submissive who enjoys giving pain (sadist) or as someone who participates in all or none of these roles. On the other hand, someone might enjoy one or many of these activities without identifying as a practitioner. (*Carole meeker, 2012, p. 155*).

The roles are not fixed categories but rather resemble a spectrum of possibilities ranging from Master to slave with multiple identities between (See image 1 below).

Image 1



These roles and their relative values are strongly contested by those in the community. For example, some people who associate the role of top & bottom as only partaking in sexual spanking, but do not consider themselves to be part of the BDSM culture, striving to differentiate themselves from the BDSM community, its members and activities (Plate, 2006). However, sexual spanking is not the only definition associated with those who identify themselves as being a top or bottom. “An individual may enjoy bondage (restraint) but not like dominance, or may enjoy receiving light amounts of pain but not enjoy being submissive.” (Surprise, 2012, p.110) The developed definitions still address this debate and variation. The variation on roles is upheld with inclusion of consensual power differentials, allowing there to be choice as to where or if one belongs on this role spectrum.

Within the spectrum of identities, there are strict societal, relational, and behavioural codes. “Role interests are often indicated through attire and the placement of key rings and other symbols and encounters appear to follow role expectations” (Wineberg, 2006, p.28). The visual representation of roles is accompanied by a corresponding code of conduct. “The roles of masochist and sadist carry with them mutually understood standards of behaviours that are to be obeyed” (Cross & Matheson, 2006, p.160). Does the developed definition reflect the norms of BDSM?

These norms and scripts are adhered to whenever an individual participates in the community (i.e. at parties and private functions). They are central to the BDSM community’s standards of cultural acceptance; regardless of how often one

actively participates in these social community outlets. As in many subcultures, participation levels vary and fluctuate, but scripts and protocols are maintained. Play (BDSM activity) often occurs at parties and is a central part of the BDSM community's culture; however, play, like pain, is one of many tools used to establish power-exchange relations. There are endless variations within BDSM culture and related play activities that describe subcultures within this community. (See image 2, below for an abridged list of play types).

Image 2

Types of Play

Physical

<p>Flagellation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Caning • Riding Crops • Flogging (flails, scourges) • Spanking • Whipping (bullwhips and single-tails) • Paddling • Punching/kicking/slapping • Pinching 	<p>Sexual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chastity • Fisting • Forced masturbation • Forced orgasm • Insertable toys • Mutual masturbation • Orgasm control • Vaginal and Anal Plugs • Sexual restraint
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Psychological

<p><i>Role Play</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age play • Auctioning • Collar and leash • Interrogation • Medical • Pony/animal play • Rape scenes • Uniform • Teacher/Student 	<p><i>Sensory</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Branding • Breath control • Clamps • Deprivation • Electric • Feathers • Fire • Needles • Piercing • Wax 	<p><i>Bondage</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cage • Chain and Rope • Collaring • Corsets • Restraints • Speech restriction • Spreader bars • Suspension • Verbal bondage • Tying to furniture
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<p><i>Ritual/Power Exchange</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boot worshipping • Established protocols • Grooming • Kneeling • Posture control • Serving as furniture/objects 	<p><i>Humiliation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feminization or cross-dressing • Forced nudity • Inspection • Interrogation • Name calling • Scat • Spitting • Watersports (urine) 	
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("Fetishes," n.d.)

As with any culture, acceptance occurs through assimilation and socialization. Acceptance into the BDSM community requires one to learn associated behaviours and expectations. "To be able to participate one has to learn its patterns of behaviour, codes of courtesy and get to know the different 'technologies' of 'playing.' In many cases the initiation of newcomers is taken into the hands of experienced long-term members of the community" (Beckmann, 2009, p.107). The BDSM scene is rife with traditions and unspoken rules about attire, socializing, and expected social and behavioural norms. Training and mentorship by prominent long-standing members is common to teach curious and/or new members and protect them from people considered untrustworthy. Participation in socially oriented, organized, informal gatherings ('parties' and 'munches') are a central part to such cultural socialization.

A variety of devices (clothing, language, mannerisms) are crucial to illustrating status and roles within the community; adherence is essential to socialization and acceptance. Dress codes commonly the leather, collars, whips, cuffs, and leashes as symbolic signifiers of role and status (also used as tools for

play) that provide visual cues and maintain roles while playing (Weinberg 2006; Beckmann 2009). Vocabulary and language use is another crucial form of socialization within the accepted cultural norm. If one is to participate, one must understand the terminology (e.g. play, scene, toys) used, alongside proper conversational language usage and acceptable interactions.

These norms and symbolic uses of clothing and language reinforce and sustain the dynamics of power-differential that is central to the SM culture (Cross & Matheson, 2006), adherence benefits each individual participants' safety and participation/enjoyment. "The mere fact of the learning process of consensual SM-skills as well as the mechanisms of informal control within the scene is in order to prevent abusive and violent situations from occurring" (Beckmann, 2009, p.105). The formal norms of the BDSM culture emphasize trust and safety, as highlighted by two common cultural mottos: Safe, Sane & Consensual (SSC) and RACK (Risk Aware Consensual Kink).

There are "strict safety standards among members. A member who breaks the rule of safety will often be expelled from the community" (Weinberg, 2006 p.26). This is especially true for dominants that take a scene too far; members will label them as dangerous and marginalize them from the community (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). An individual's reputation within the larger community is often based on their knowledge of safe practices, play skills, and trustworthiness; those viewed as being safe and trusted have higher social-status in the community and are sought-after play partners. Safety scripts often include the use of 'safe words,' such as the common use of traffic lights as symbolic indications to communicate during play (i.e.

yellow to slow down or red to stop). Open communication is used to establish limits and boundaries in play.

The theatricalize context, sensual arousal, and tool use (which includes pain) in the definition's key phrases allows for the inclusion of aforementioned types of play without being inclusive and/or exclusive to BDSM involvement. The opening phrase of the developed definition directly points to participation variations. The importance of safety is addressed in the later part of the definition, stating that BDSM is *structured around openness, communication, trust, and safety*.

In review, BDSM is a complex culture with overlapping identities and populations. Although a definition of 'what is BDSM' may never be complete, the definition developed here addresses previously identified elements from the current literature and holds true when tested against the reviewed norms, customs, and values. One must be aware of the limitations of this definition, as it is structured from research on BDSM communities in North America that have been faced with limited population access. However, this definition provides a starting point for future research which can help those within the accepted socio-sexual norm to address cultural misunderstandings and gain related insights that can lead to learning and growth.

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