

# Whips & Chains Excite Me: BDSM, Social Acceptance and the Sexual Double Standard



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## INTRODUCTION

Although awareness and popularity surrounding the BDSM community is growing, practitioners continue to experience discrimination and social stigma.

This study evaluated social acceptance of both BDSM as a practice, and individuals who engage in Dominant-submissive (D/s) relationships.

### Discrimination against the BDSM community

- BDSM as psychopathology (APA, 2000; Kleinplatz & Moser, 2007)
- Primarily feminists & religious groups (Wright, 2006)
- BDSM as domestic violence (Chancer, 2004; Johnson, 2001)
- SM and the law (Weait, 2007)

### Traditional Gender Role Norms

- Women = Submissive
- Men = Dominant

### Reverse Double Standard

- Women depicted as “Dominatrix” → sexy and empowering
- Men depicted as “Dominant” → abusive and opportunistic

### Background Literature

- Majority of empirical research focuses on SM in a pathological context.
- Virtually no empirical work on SM-identified individuals & public perception (Yost, 2010).
- SM-identified individuals are harshly discriminated against by many groups and healthcare professionals (Wright, 2006, 2008).
- Approximately 5-10% of the sexually active population engage in BDSM (Reinisch, Beasley, & Kent, 1990).
- Preference for BDSM is not associated with past abuse, psychopathology, or sexual difficulties (Richters et al., 2008).
- Intergroup Contact Theory: Normative information exposure reduced transphobia when followed by a transgender presenter (Walch et al., 2012).

## OBJECTIVES

Two hypotheses were proposed regarding social acceptance of SM:

### In a D/s relationship,

1. Women in a position of dominance are evaluated as more socially acceptable than men in a position of dominance.
2. Exposure to information that normalizes the relationship of a D/s couple increases evaluations of social acceptability for D/s behaviour as a variant of healthy sexuality.

## MATERIALS & METHOD

### Design

- Attitudes and social acceptance of sadomasochism and D/s relationships were evaluated using a 2 (gender of the Dominant) x 2 (interview with D/s couple; no interview) x 2 (gender of the participant) multifactorial design.

### Participants

- $N = 236$  (female  $n = 172$ ), 18- to 56-year-old undergraduate students enrolled at a large Western Canadian university.

### Measures

- D/s discipline scene served as stimuli → a vignette, a photo, and an interview with the D/s couple.
- Two versions of a vignette (male Dominant and female Dominant) were created to provide participants with an accurate representation on which to base their responses about BDSM.
- Vignettes were accompanied by a gender-matched photo (see Figures 1 and 2) and description of a heterosexual D/s couple engaging in a scene involving mild Dominant/submissive behaviour.
- DV Measures included:
  - Demographics
  - The Attitudes about Sadomasochism Scale (ASMS; Yost, 2010)
  - Additional items generated to assess participants' opinions about the couple in the vignette specifically.

### Method

- Participants were randomly assigned to one of 4 conditions and were exposed to (1) a D/s scene comprised (with vignette and gender-matched photo of D/s couple), and (2) an interview with a D/s couple.

Figure 1  
Female Dominant/ male submissive



Figure 2  
Male Dominant/ female submissive



## RESULTS

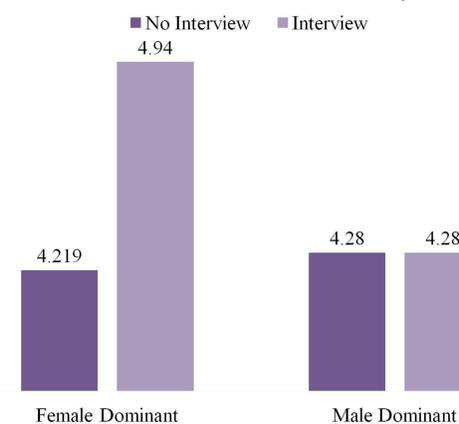
- 24% of participants reported that they had engaged in BDSM
- Previous research suggests ~10% engagement in BDSM practice (Reinisch, Beasley, & Kent, 1990; Richters et al., 2008).
- 2 x 2 x 2 MANCOVA (with participant history of BDSM experience as covariate) evaluated the effects of Dominant gender and normative information exposure on the social acceptance of BDSM.
  - Significant effect for covariate,  $F(2, 226) = 30.47, p < .001$ ;  $Pillai's Trace = .21$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .214$ .
  - Significant effect for gender of the dominant,  $F(2, 226) = 3.25, p < .05$ ;  $Pillai's Trace = .03$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ , in favour of female dominants.
  - Significant 3-way interaction for gender of the dominant, interview presence, and participant gender,  $F(2, 226) = 3.09, p < .05$ ;  $Pillai's Trace = .03$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .028$ .

### Follow-Up Univariate Analyses

- The covariate (BDSM history) retained significance on both measures
- The 3-way interaction was significant only on the ASMS.
- Gender of the dominant and presence of the normative interview with the D/s couple had a significant effect only on women's social acceptance of BDSM when the woman was in a position of dominance.

Variable	Scale	F	p	$\eta^2$
BDSM History (Covariate)	ASMS	44.5	.00	.16
	Vignettes	61.2	.00	.21
Gender of Participant	ASMS	3.5	.06	.02
Dominant Gender x Interview x Participant Gender	ASMS	3.8	.05	.02

### ASMS Mean Score for Female Participants



## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to evaluate two constructs regarding the levels of social acceptance of BDSM as a healthy variation of sexuality when applied to a D/s relationship.

There was no evidence to support H1 → that females are more accepted than men in a position of dominance.

Partial support found for H2 → among women only, the presence of a normative interview significantly increased social acceptance of BDSM practices, when the female vignette character was in a position of dominance.

### Limitations:

- Use of vignettes vs. videos
- Sample population- age, experience, etc.
- Pop culture influences (homogenized responses)
- Inter-participant discussion

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