

Between Pleasure, Pain and Power: Theorizing Masculinities through BDSM

Dana Rumenoova Bogova

Department of Media, Culture, Heritage

School of Arts and Cultures

Newcastle University

Submitted in fulfilment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

November 2022

Abstract:

Men and Masculinity Studies have been laying the ground for the study of masculinities for a while now, however, now-normative approaches tend to tie into modernism, structuralism, and hegemony. The findings of this thesis are that these approaches have not been able to adequately represent men's contemporary experiences of masculinities. In response I use post – structuralist feminist and masculinity theories to more accurately explore the ways in which men negotiate gender relations and sexualities. The objective of the thesis is to understand men's identities and practices and, in the process, challenges conventional approaches to understanding men's gender relations and sexual practices in the BDSM (Bondage, Dominance, Submission/ Masochism) scene. The methods used to conduct this study include participant observation fieldwork and online data collection through the use of forums and ready available texts/comments posted by users. The fieldwork serves as a productive element through which we can make sense of the ways men negotiate gender and sexual relations. Both offline and online scenes of BDSM were studied.

The fieldwork confirms that BDSM has the ability to weaken gender identities, creating fluidness and shaping 'performativity'. Masculinities are challenged by BDSM participants. BDSM proves valuable for noticing antagonisms men can face in relation to performativity of masculinities. The data shows that male and male presenting BDSM practitioners sometimes break down rigid codes of masculinities and are challenging the strict structures which men are expected to fit in and thereby reproduce. The findings can prove a valuable addition to the field of men and masculinities, as it demonstrates how modernist and structural theorisations of masculinities prove insufficient for understanding BDSM masculinities. Yet, the findings also highlight certain issues that need more exploring, namely some instances of transphobia, gatekeeping, classism, racism and upholding of misogyny. These opposing findings are more than welcome as they show that BDSM and related masculinities are shown to be more layered, mobile and complex than previous approaches allow representation of. As such, the thesis is also a valuable anthropological study into one of the more popular contemporary sexual cultures.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisors Chris Haywood and Clifton Evers. Chris, thank you for believing in me and starting this journey with me, for the constant support and many laughs. Clifton, thank you for agreeing to join our team, for all the amazing advice and for being so understanding. I cannot express my gratitude to you both for your academic and professional support throughout these four years. I could not have asked for better supervisors!

Second, I would like to thank my amazing husband, Jerome. Thank you for putting up with me, my love, and for always supporting me and pushing me to be my best. You were always so proud of me and you never stopped believing in my research and me. I love you.

Third, this journey would not have been possible without the help and support of my family. Mum, you have been my biggest hype man since I was a kid and everything I have achieved was possible because of you. Even when you could not understand me or did not know what I was up to, you would always just support me no questions asked. Dad, even though you would never be able to read this I hope you are proud of me, you were telling people I was a Doctor even before I got formally accepted. I am really sorry you couldn't see me finish this journey. Rada, you are the most infuriating but best little sister that was always so proud of me. Nati, you have been my best friend for over a decade and you never left my side and supported me through everything. Grandma, you are the one who started my love in anthropology and for this I will always be grateful. I love having my weekly academic discussions with you. I love you so much.

And last but not least, my deepest gratitude to the PGRs in MCH. Jésus my man, thank you for helping me navigate this difficult journey. You were one of my first real friends in MCH and you always supported me. Special thanks to Samantha, James, Jenny, Muhammed and Heather for all the laughs, fantastic times in the pub and for bouncing off ideas with me and helping me be a better researcher. I will be so pissed if you don't put me in your acknowledgments!

And of course, thank you to the staff at Newcastle uni and SACS for all the support.

Table of contents

Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
List of Figures.....	ix
Glossary of Terms.....	x
1. Introduction.....	1
1. 1. Where it all began.....	1
1. 2. Research Questions and Aims.....	4
1. 3. Reflexivity and Theoretical Overview.....	6
1. 4. Findings and Outcomes.....	9
1. 5. Chapters and Synopsis.....	12
1. 6. Conclusion.....	16
2. Literature Review.....	17
2. 1. Introducing the Literature.....	17
2. 2. Sexualisation and the Discourses on sex and pleasure.....	18
2. 2. 1. Sex, Virgins, Sluts, Men and Deviants – How far have we not gone?.....	22
2. 3. Examining the theoretical framework on Masculinities.....	25
2. 3. 1. The divide between structuralism and post structuralism.....	29
2. 4. Pleasure and Pain: Background and theory in BDSM.....	36
2. 4. 1. The Top/Bottom dichotomy and the manifestations of Power.....	39
2. 4. 2. Gender roles in BDSM: The Performance of Masculinity	43
2. 5. Sex, digitality and rock'n'roll: Contemporary experiences of BDSM through technology and online platforms.....	46

2.6. Studying Masculinities through BDSM: Concluding Thoughts	50
3. Methodology.....	53
3.1. Introducing the Chapter.....	53
3.2. Situating and Obtaining Knowledge: Ontological and Epistemological traditions in Cultural Anthropology.....	53
3.3. Designing Qualitative Research: Benefits and Challenges.....	56
3.3.1. Participant Observation in Anthropology.....	58
3.3.2. Power and Participant observation.....	64
3.3.3. Data Collection process.....	66
3.3.4. Positioning the Digital.....	70
3.3.5. Issues of Reflexivity.....	72
3.3.6. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.....	75
3.4. Ethical Considerations in Sexuality Research: Mitigating dangers and risks.....	77
3.4.1. The Dark Side of Academia: The Lonely Female researcher.....	78
3.5. Conclusion.....	88
4. Analysing Online Dominance, Submission and Masculinities: Challenging and Enforcing Gender Relations through Eroticism.....	90
4.1. Introduction.....	90
4.2. Men performing masculinities: Where do we stand?.....	91
4.2.1. Introduction and Overview.....	91
4.2.2. Submitting Masculinities: Tales of 1001 spankings.....	96

4.2.3. ‘Jupiter in Furs’: Dominant masculinities, fantasies and desiring the neoliberal dominant Alpha – Male.....	105
4. 2. 4.Cuckolds and hierarchy – fetishization of masculinities.....	113
4. 3. Conclusion.....	116
5. Analysing Gender Performances in the UK BDSM scene.....	118
5.1. Gender performance: Masculinities at play in the UK and Online BDSM.....	118
5.1.1. Introduction.....	118
5.1.2. Setting the Scene.....	119
5. 2. ‘Don’t torture yourself, darling – this is my job!’ BDSM relationships and identities.....	123
5.2.1. ‘Look, I am not transphobic, however...’ The Good, The Bad and the Excluded.....	133
5. 2. 2. Pop culture and BDSM: Between the real and the fake	147
5.3. Conclusion.....	150
6. Analysis: Love in the times of Coronavirus: Sexual online platforms and negotiating gender.....	152
6. 1. Introduction.....	152
6.2. Research within the online sphere: Where kink is the new cool.....	154
6. 2. 1. BDSM, porn and gender: The makeup of the online sexual platforms.....	154
6. 2. 2. Boomers vs Zoomers: The generational differences in masculinities in the new age BDSM.....	160
6. 3. Conclusion.....	177
7. Analysis: ‘Call me by my BDSM name!’ Subverting and Experiencing gender within BDSM roles.....	178
7.1. Introduction.....	178

7.2. To fuck or not to fuck: BDSM, sex and the tragedy of the submissive.....	179
7. 3. The ‘messiness’ of masculinities and gender: 50 Shades of freed indeed.....	194
7. 4. Conclusion.....	202
8. Conclusion.....	203
8.1. The Road so far.....	203
8.2. Original Contribution and Findings.....	204
8.2.1. Limitations.....	208
8.3. Personal Thoughts, Reflections and Future Directions.....	209
Bibliography.....	212

List of Figures

Fig. 1. The Original Listing information on Fetlife.....	139
Fig. 2. The organisers defending their stance.....	140
Fig. 3. The organisers response.....	140
Fig. 4. The first part of the blogpost.....	142
Fig. 5. Note the irrational fear of 'pronouns'.....	142
Fig. 6. A response on the blog post.....	144
Fig. 7. Tumblr post.....	161

Glossary of terms used in the thesis (based on my personal research and BDSM glossary ReKink, 2018):

BDSM (Bondage/Dominance/submission/Sadism/masochism): An umbrella term to describe consensual kink and fetish activities. BDSM is both seen as a type of sexual practice and also a type of sexual scene that includes many other dynamics. The original name was S/M (sadism – masochism), however, it has grown to include more terms and it keeps growing).

Bottom: The partner who submits it can be a synonym to ‘submissive’. However, Bottom is not a strictly BDSM term. Bottom is the opposite of the Top and it is also used in the context of gay men’s sexual relationships. In a BDSM context it is the partner who gives up the power, however, it can be used by people who do not necessarily identify with full-on ‘submission’. It is a more general, broad term.

Bull: This is the term for the outsider (usually a man) used by the wife to humiliate the husband. He is the outsider who sleeps with the wife, and the husband (cuckold) watches. Not a BDSM term per se. In BDSM context it can have a different context; this could be the husband of the Dominatrix who, along with her, humiliates the submissive outsider (the cuckold).

CNC play (Consensual – non-consent): Simply put this is a ‘rape’ play. A very specific type of play involving the Dominant partner ‘forcing’ themselves on the submissive to recreate a rape scene. This is a consensual, carefully pre-negotiated activity that is seen as risky, and it needs very careful planning and full trust between the partners.

Cuckold: The partner (often male and husband) who gets humiliated by watching his wife sleeping or playing with another man (or men) who is an outsider (the Bull). Not a BDSM term per se. However, in BDSM context the term ‘cuckold’ varies. A cuckold is also a type of a submissive man who enters a relationship with a Dominatrix and her partner (who is the Bull). In this case the outsider is the one who is humiliated by both the Dominatrix and the husband.

D/s: Short for Dominant/submissive dynamic

Daddy/Mommy: A very specific style of Dominance. It is all about care, with a component of age gap fetishization but not always. While the Daddy figure can be about an age gap relationship, it is also used to describe this type of tender, sweet and patron-like relationship between the involved parties.

Dominant/Dominatrix (shortened Dom for men, Domme for women): The partner who 'borrows' the power in the BDSM dynamic and exercises it over the other partner. The word is often written in capital letters to demonstrate power.

Little girls/little boys (often referred to as simply 'littles'): The partner paired with the Daddy/Mommy figure. It is a specific style and type of submission.

Masochist: The opposite of a sadist. The person receiving the pain and getting pleasure from it. Anyone can be a masochist, it should not be automatically equated to a sub/slave/bottom. It is a descriptor as well as a specific BDSM role.

Master/ Mistress: The partner exercising the power. It can also be used as a synonym for a Dominant, however, Master has a more specific use. Masters are usually paired with slaves, and they signify a more extreme relationship that can be performed 24/7.

Power exchange: The dynamic that occurs between a Dominant and a submissive. It signifies that power travels freely between the participants, and it is being borrowed and consensually given up for a short period of time. This can be reversed and stopped at any time.

RACK: Risk-aware consensual kink. A BDSM slogan that urges people to be very aware with the dynamics they enter.

Sadist: The person inflicting pain and punishment and getting pleasure from it. **NOT** a synonym for a Dominant/Master/Top. Sadist is a descriptor but it also can be a specific BDSM roles – a Dominant can be a sadist, however, submissives can be sadists too. Often in the popular literature and media, the sadist is the Dominant, but that is not always the case.

Sissy: A specific type of a cross-dressing man within BDSM, who dresses in sexy feminine clothes to be submitted and humiliated. The crossdressing sissy, while usually a submissive, can be a switch. Often these submissives identify as men outside of BDSM, so in a way, this is a form of submissive drag performance.

Slave: The opposite of Master. Again, similarly, it can be used as a synonym for a submissive. However, it is used in more specific dynamics.

SSC: The BDSM consent motto. Safe, Sane and Consensual

Submissive (shortened sub): The partner who lends the power in the BDSM dynamic. It is written in small letters to show the 'giving up' of power.

Switches: BDSM practitioners who do not identify with the binary concepts of Dominance/submission. They can also switch roles based on whom they are paired with. They can be dominants and submissives in different contexts.

Top: The partner who exercises the power. It is usually used as a synonym for 'Dominant', however, they are not technically synonyms. Top as a term exists outside of BDSM in the context of sexual relations between gay men. In BDSM it can be used as a synonym to Dominant but it can also be used by people who might not necessarily always identify as Dominants, just as the partners who exercise power during a specific BDSM play. It is a more broad, general term.

Chapter 1: Introduction:

MEN! And the academic pleasures of BDSM

1. 1. Where it all began

The scene and culture of BDSM is no longer just confined within pornography and dark and seedy sex shops (Khan, 2018). For decades now this sexual platform has been receiving popularity and has entered everyday culture through advertisements, capitalism, feminist discourse on sex (e.g. sex positivity), neo liberalism and literature (Musser, 2015).

Regardless, BDSM still occupies what I would say 'liminal' space in the sense that while no longer entirely marginalised, there are still many misconceptions and pushback against it. The pushback does not only come from religious and conservative currents, but also from feminist and intersectional standpoints. Whether BDSM is sexually liberating and supporting the sexual citizenship of people or it is just a system that justifies sexual abuse, is still very much a central topic in sexuality research.

As it will be established in the later chapters such as Literature Review, Methodology and throughout the analysis, I am not necessarily trying to resolve the question of whether BDSM is damaging/liberating. Instead, I am attempting to show how gender roles operate withing this sexual scene and how this can aid us to understand the sexual and gender fluidity so important currently. The research does centre around masculinities, and I am aiming to challenge some of the prevailing theorizations around masculinity studies and show how masculinities are operating through the use of BDSM and sexual/personal relationships.

The thesis does not claim to be a comprehensive study either and the limitations would be discussed in the Conclusion chapter. As was gathering the data and analysing I was frustrated most of the time as it seemed that there is not a definite answer on how we can theorize masculinities either and it looked like it was verging on the impossible to capture all the nuance considering how fast masculinities change. However, it became very clear that this 'messiness', these contradictions I kept coming across, are actually data on their own

and are fascinating. My thesis departed from the idea that conceptualising gender is difficult, if not impossible and people cannot be boxed into structured and categories, yet I was becoming frustrated when I could not in fact box masculinities into structures.

These contradictions are very central to my research, and I embraced them. Masculinities are messy and 'sticky' (Berggren, 2014) and my data illustrates this.

My first interest and knowledge into BDSM unfortunately started with the *50 Shades* trilogy as at the time this was the only famous book about the topic. The masculinity of Christian Grey has always been interesting to me –and while there has been extensive media and scholarly analysis of Grey's character, in general, men and masculinities within BDSM are relatively understudied, as I came to know. Overall, the way women and specifically submissive women are being affected by BDSM has been studied often to the point of uncomfortable obsession – some feminist scholars in their pursuit to outline how dangerous BDSM and submission is for women are making full circle and might be stepping into misogynistic territory (Scott, 2015). In a patriarchal society, women are constantly policed, their sexual desires are always under the microscope, they are victimised or denied any agency. Women of colour within BDSM can face even harsher criticisms and victimisation – as Cruz (2016) has outlined, Black women within BDSM can be denied their own sexual agency and stripped away from their desires simply because BDSM works with concepts such as 'submission' and 'master vs slave' dynamics. While submissive men have been researched, I would like to present a more in depth, specific research into masculinities and submission within BDSM. I would have thought that submissive men would be at the centre of gender studies within BDSM as they go against the 'acceptable' masculinity and maybe it is my own biases (I guess I have never questioned dominance in men as I have been socialised in patriarchal culture) but male submission just sounds fascinating to me. When I started that project, I knew I had to make sure I address some of these gaps. Yet, after reading and obtaining data, I realised that dominance is just as fascinating to me and very different than what I had imagined. Dominance within BDSM is multifaceted, unique and performed very contextually and practitioners are well aware of the tensions surrounding concepts like 'Dom', 'Master', 'Top'. I discovered that men specifically have shown antagonisms and irregularities with the way masculinities and dominance work. And I have

tried to capture that within my analysis. At the same time, the study of male submission also yielded some unexpected and fascinating discourses that I am thrilled to share.

Even though my thesis looks at men and BDSM, I do not just include discussions on straight cis men, and I am trying to open and challenge the category of 'Men'. Women are also included within my theorizations as often within masculinity theories women become absent from the conversation (O'Neil, 2015) and considering I will be working with feminist and poststructuralist theories, I will not be excluding practitioners. In this sense, I would argue that people relate to one another and do not exist in a vacuum, so it is important to capture nuance and various experiences in order to produce a good subjective, emotive feminist study which I aspire to. Before I continue with outlining this chapter and the exact aims, I would like to caution that as an anthropologist, and as a feminist researcher, I am coming from a sex positive and BDSM positive place and I aim to showcase the reality as much as possible of the BDSM scene (Leurs, 2017). However, I am not trying to give romanticised view on BDSM – the scene can be problematic, abusive, and unfortunately, as I came to know transphobic and even racist, with instances of class-based discrimination (Weiss, 2006). Nevertheless, BDSM practices can teach us and help us bridge the gap between feminist theory and masculinity studies as BDSM practices challenge the inherent gendered categories of cis and trans 'Men' and 'Women' and aims to critique heteronormative binaries. In the following sections, the theories on masculinities would be outlined.

More specifically: The introduction is charting the ways which this thesis has undertaken in order to complicate the ways masculinities have been researched and explore new discourses emerging into the ways modern day masculinities are performed. The research has been done through a study into the culture of BDSM (Bondage/Dominance/Submission/Sado-Masochism). More importantly, BDSM has had a complicated relationship with gender performances and unfortunately, masculinities within BDSM are currently understudied (Scott, 2015). Feminist research has studied BDSM for decades now (Rubin, 1984; Califia, 2000; Weiss, 2006; Newmahr, 2011; Lindemann, 2011; Cruz, 2016; Scott, 2015, Carlström, 2018), however, the way men participate within this sexual platform and the way masculinities are performed has not been a point of continuous study. I believe, there is a large gap within feminist, anthropological and gender studies

which my thesis aims to fill. Namely, the way masculinity performances are manifested within a large sexual scene. It has been proposed (Bauer, 2018) that the way gender operates within BDSM is unique and fascinating, in that people do not aim to fit within any pre-determined ways of gender performances. In fact, BDSM gives freedom for exploration of bodies, pleasure, sexualities and gender. Taking into account the historical process of the sexualisation of cultures (Attwood and Smith, 2015) I am interested to look how contemporary masculinities are manifested in a sexually explicit, popular culture such as BDSM. The study is situated in the discipline of cultural anthropology, which means I am looking at specific contexts and a specific culture (BDSM) in order to problematise some of the current ways of researching masculinities. I am arguing that these ways are becoming outdated and masculinity theories need reworking and changing. As I am an anthropologist, I am not aiming to make grand universal claims, but I am putting masculinities into context, and I will be demonstrating how masculinities within BDSM do not fit with current masculinity theories.

Chapter 2 Literature review begins with exploration into the process of sexualisation and it puts BDSM into current context. Theories of masculinities would also be examined in relation to the sexualisation of cultures and the chapter finishes with a review into BDSM theories. **Chapter 3 Methodology** looks at the philosophical and theoretical background of my study and outlines the methods, as well as issues of theories, reflexivity and ethics. **Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7** are the analysis chapters where my original research is presented. A thorough description of the chapters would be in the final section.

1.2. Research Questions and Aim

The research questions have been identified for the study are as follows:

- 1) How can we theorize contemporary masculinities and what challenges does this pose?
 - Here the aim is to evaluate whether in fact changes and antagonisms have occurred within masculinities and if yes in what way. The thesis assumes the standpoint that 'modernism' is no longer suitable for theorizing masculinities,

and masculinities, along with other gender expressions, are not and should not be seen as 'static' and unchanging (Beasley, 2015). Following this the argument is that masculinities would have to also be discussed in terms of the contingency of gender as assumed by Butler (1992) and Wittig (1992). Furthermore, I would argue that in the process of sexualisation which is marked with growing visibility of sexual cultures, new ways of performing gender and sexuality, gender expressions marked by fluidness and contingency (Attwood, 2006; 2018) we can also see how masculinities are changing and breaking down fixed structures.

2) In what ways can the study on sexual spaces (platforms) such as BDSM, aid us in mapping contemporary day masculinities?

- This study of BDSM aims to bring forth discourse on new ways of creating and challenging gender expressions and more specifically to see whether there are any antagonisms within masculinities and men's experiences (that is if there is any tension in the way men are expected to perform masculinities vs what they want to perform). The study on BDSM – specific roles (such as Doms, switches, subs, tops, Master, slaves, etc) is helpful since these can be tied to gender performances or openly challenge gender (e.g Bauer, 2018). This study of BDSM would aim to complicate masculinities' discourses and the subsequent analysis chapters have captured this and provide examples of how this is achieved.

3) How is gendered configured within BDSM and how (or if) it is being challenged in BDSM and how it helps people to explore their identities and sexualities?

- The thesis challenges heteronormative, essentialist and binary understandings of how masculinities work. As it would be discussed in Literature review, masculinity studies tend to be studied through modernism and outdated essential notions, yet this is not compatible with poststructuralist and feminist way of framing gender. It has been shown in the literature that BDSM does challenge gender binary

(Newmahr, 2011; Banerjee et al, 2018; Califia, 2000) but not much has been written on masculinities specifically. The aim of my research is to put the focus specifically on masculinities in order to address some of the gaps in the literature and to challenge the predominant modernist discourses in masculinity studies.

I would like to address the fact that there is not a comprehensive set of research questions. They are specific but broad enough to allow the structure of the thesis and to make sure that I know what I am researching. They also helped me to focus. But since I decided to undertake digital data collection, the study became predominantly data driven and themes started being identified and they could be placed within those three research questions. This is discussed in depth in the Methodology chapter.

1. 3. Reflexivity and theoretical overview

Considering this thesis discusses men and masculinities in relation to a sexual scene such as BDSM, I believe I need to delve briefly in feminist reflexivity and position myself as a person and researcher. Reflexivity in relation to my fieldwork would be discussed in much more detail in Chapter 3 Methodology.

As a woman doing research on men and masculinities, I do recognise that in more precarious and odd position compared to my male colleagues (Lefkowich, 2019). As a cis and fem presenting woman, I realise that I can never fully know how men experience their lives, identities, masculinities and problems they need to navigate. Following Lefkowich who has also been facing the question throughout her research career of how appropriate it is for women to study masculine spaces, I would also like to 'disrupt rather than reinforce the problematic assumptions about gender upon which the questions/critiques are predicated' (2019: 2). In this sense, by enforcing reflexivity, being aware of the power dynamics and reiterating my own privileges my study could provide useful for researchers and a good addition to the masculinity studies.

I do not know what it is to be a man in the 21st century and I do not pretend to have been able to assess and capture everything with my research either. This is one of the reasons why my research is also qualitative – I am not aspiring to create a general overview on men's experiences and masculinities but to provide an analytical discourse on some of the

movements emerging in BDSM when it comes to the performance of gender. My research problematises a number of theoretical frameworks employed in the study of masculinities, as I believe they are becoming possibly outdated. As a feminist researcher and a woman, I do not believe that current masculinity theorizations are contributing to the destabilization of power and patriarchal relations adequately (Beasley, 2013, 2015; Wailing, 2019, Johansson and Ottemo, 2015; O’Neill, 2015).

Unfortunately, some masculinity studies have not been utilising the feminist and post structural critiques of gender. As Beasley has argued (2013), feminist studies, as well as gender and sexuality studies aim to understand power in post – structuralist terms and aim to deconstruct it; such deconstruction is possible by the destabilisation of identities themselves and destabilising gender. This Foucauldian and Butlerian inspired theory on gender and power is at the centre of a number of feminist and sexuality research and is going to be used in this thesis.

It is also necessary to highlight my feminist theoretical affiliations that are going to underpin my research. Considering my research deals not only with masculinities but with BDSM as well, I am taking an approach through sex positive feminism. My study on BDSM is inspired by scholars such as Gayle Rubin, Judith Butler, Margot Weiss, Arianne Cruz, Pat Califia, and Staci Newmahr. These theorists would be discussed in depth in the Literature review. When it comes to masculinity theories, this would also be detailed in much more depth in Chapter 2 but here I would briefly go over some of the theorizations that are driving my research. Moffatt’s work (2019) has been an inspiration for me as he looks at the different ways of negotiating masculinities in the changing urban setting and the globalization; that is, the various ways of resisting and creating environments for the practicing of masculinities and negotiating men’s identities. As Moffatt (2019) writes:

‘Even as culturally dominant claims to the proper nature of male and female are reinforced, the very notion that there could be a fundamental and authentic expression of human identity has been brought into question[...]In these cosmopolitan settings, some women and men are engaged in an escape from the confines of a mainstream expression of culture that has been reified historically both in thought and practice. Artistic and cultural expressions have morphed into a

‘plurality of local oppositions’ working inside and against the context of social and economic standardization imposed by globalization’ (p.3)

Moffatt has widely challenged the notion of ‘single maleness’, and he argues that there are multiple ways of creating masculinities. The author aims to show how various social factors are influencing gender such as class, ethnicity, sexuality. The notion of *altmodern* which is used to define the new sociocultural reality marked by the plurality. The setting used throughout the book is the Canadian urban setting and it is not to suggest that environment is the root cause of the multiplicity of expressions but rather to map the terrain of masculinity in an urban setting marked by global forces.

Here we can also include Dummitt (2011) who looks at the issue of masculinity (and men) being seen as a uniform and universal. As he argues, historically men’s gender has been practically absent in the most of academic circles and social circles in general which turns men into genderless beings and that they exist outside gender, beyond it even, which only helps with the continuous unequal gender relations between men and women, and men and men. In other words, men were the politicians, leaders and most importantly humans while women were the ones who possessed gender and were governed by it (Dummitt, 2011).

This is where BDSM can prove quite useful for the study on masculinities – some BDSM practices challenge the idea of the ‘unchanging’ body, metaphorically and quite literally as well. Carlström’s account on BDSM shows how bodies in BDSM become the challenged, ‘opened up’, placed under critique and admired for not being perfect:

Some BDSM practices require access to each other’s bodies, where what is usually considered taboo and disgusting becomes part of the role-play. Examples are wet and scat plays (games containing urine and faeces) and various forms of humiliation games. Most people experience for example nudity, dirt, bodily secretions and forced feeding as degrading. Unlike contexts outside of BDSM where, for example blood and urine should be avoided, body fluids are less taboo within BDSM. BDSM can thus go against the ordinary understanding of body fluids (2018: 213)

As Carlström (ibid.) posits the grotesque comes out to challenge the perfect bodies as the ultimate ideals in popular culture and the mainstream. The body is subverted and the

bourgeoisie ideal is transcended and twisted. In the scene, bodies and their functions are no longer confined, but interact with the outer world. Body spillages are no longer a taboo, but are evoked in regards to pleasure, rebellion and transgression. Sexual acts involving bodily fluids are highly eroticised precisely because they overstep the social boundaries which leads to freedom from the negative constraints. BDSM in this sense is very useful to capture how male and female bodies (however, the emphasis would be on the former) are being challenged and put in the middle of the 'messiness' that they have been guarded against for so long. With BDSM no one's body is preserved and the boundaries between what is female, male, public and private are blurred and diminished which only shows the instability of both body and gender. Through this we might be able to break the ontological certainties of the masculinities and help with moving towards equal alliances. With the following section I will demonstrate how my chapters would feed into my theoretical positions and how they help with the thesis' arguments.

1. 4. Findings and Outcomes

The thesis generated a number of findings based on the physical and online fieldwork. The underlying argument of the thesis is that Men and Masculinities studies' theoretical approaches, tend to rely upon modernism, structuralism, and hegemony. The findings of this thesis are that these approaches have not been able to adequately represent and explain men's contemporary experiences and practices of masculinities. The BDSM scene has been selected for this, as it has been argued (Simula and Sumerau, 2019) that BDSM practices have the ability to queer and break down gender binary and gender can be discussed in terms of fluidity. I am departing from the argument that BDSM practices can challenge gender binary and my findings confirm this, yet there are things that need to be taken into account when discussing gender within BDSM in terms of fluidity.

Based on this I searched to understand how men navigate gender relations and identities through their sexual practices within the scene of BDSM. I was curious to see whether we can talk about masculinities in terms of contingency and fluidity. Some of the main findings of the research concern the relationship between masculinities and dominance. This is also where my original contribution to the field lies within. In depth qualitative studies into real

life masculinities and dominance within BDSM are scarce, with Scott (2015), Childs (2006), McCoun (2006) and Bauer (2016) being some of the researchers who have explicitly dedicated research on masculinities. However, Scott's research concerns literature and movie dominant characters, not real-life dominant men, and the rest are focusing specifically on gay leather S/M clubs. I was more interested in looking at straight cis and trans men's experiences with dominance, as this is where I wanted to bring more in-depth discussion. There is a fantastic body of work on trans and queer BDSM representation (e.g. Califia, 1988, 2000; Bauer, 2016; Childs, 2016; Mosher et al, 2006), yet there is not a heavy focus on trans men and dominance. This is where I found evidence from my research that there is a tension between 'traditional/'patriarchal' (participants also referred to it as 'toxic') understanding of masculinity and being a dominant within BDSM. As some of the dominant men in my data discussed, dominance comes with lots of emotional and psychological commitment which has been framed as incompatible with traditional ideas of 'hardness', 'stoicism', and 'strength'. In other words, men find it hard to fit within types and structures that are often socially expected by them. This sentiment was also echoed by trans men, who are also pushing against the idea of BDSM dominance being understood as this abstract paragon of unchecked masculinized strength. Both trans and cis men can create diverse forms of dominance within BDSM to suit their own masculinities and gender expressions, thus complicating the way dominance is understood within BDSM. These findings confirm that BDSM has the ability to complicate gender expressions, and it allows men to perform contingent masculinities that cannot be captured within strict structures.

My research into men and submission within BDSM also yielded interesting results. I discovered that some submissive men could find it difficult to align their masculinities within the idea of submission. As a result, some submissive men are also attempting to complicate the discourse on submission within BDSM. Just like with dominance, submission is not one structured box that has to be performed in the same way by everyone. What is considered 'submissive' should also expand and give space to alternative ways of performing it. However, some of my findings on submissive men also confirmed that they can use the concept of 'topping from the bottom' to submit dominant women. This has been discussed by Lindemann (2011) and based on some of the data I gathered, dominant women are anxious about the ways submissive men might act. My findings are challenging the idea of

‘topping from the bottom’ which means that the submissive has the power and the ability to stop a play at any time, not the dominant. This is a popular sentiment in BDSM academic research (Rivoli, 2015; Zussman and Pierce, 1998, Jackson, 2016). I am challenging this sentiment, as based on my findings, BDSM practitioners are often not happy with this idea. On one hand it is a paradoxical sentiment, the point of a D/s dynamic is the giving up of power. But the more important finding concerns the idea of consent and sexual agency. Saying that the submissive has all the power, means that the dominant partner has no say during a sexual play. Based on my data, during a BDSM play everyone has the power, however, the submissive ‘lends’ it to the dominant partner in a symbolic way in order for the submissive to receive their pleasure. My findings here take into account the issue of consent – everyone in a BDSM play can give and withdraw consent at any point because no one is in an actual control. The power exchange is symbolic and temporary. The findings here are very important and this is where I significantly depart from the BDSM literature. I believe ‘topping from the bottom’ can be a very dangerous idea as it does not take into account consent. Furthermore, where the literature discusses this idea, it always concerns submissive women and dominant men (Rivoli, 2015; Herbert and Weaver, 2015), so it almost seems that authors subconsciously equate dominance with masculinity and submission with femininity. In other words, ‘topping from the bottom’ is used to justify the safety of submissive women in BDSM. Here I am arguing that BDSM roles need to be complicated and ‘opened up’. That is, submission and dominance are not straightforward or literal. We need to be careful how we discuss gender within BDSM so we do not replicate the same gender binary existing in patriarchal structures. My research provides original contribution here and challenges some of the academic discourse on the role of the submissive.

Yet, while my findings overall support the argument that BDSM has the ability to complicate masculinities and that it breaks gender binaries, we need to be careful with the notion of ‘fluidity’. I have discovered that BDSM practices can reproduce heteronormativity and on occasions it fails to challenge gender binary roles. Unfortunately, this is where I have discovered instances of transphobia, misogyny and transmisogyny. Here we can see how BDSM does have the ability to transgress, but unfortunately it can also be complicit in replicating the same patriarchal social relations that are common in the outside

‘mainstream culture’. This should not be seen as an attack on the scene, but we need to be aware of some of the problematic discourses that can be taking place and we need to take them into account when reporting on how some gender relations are being understood.

Overall we can see how ‘messy’ and even ‘knotty’ masculinities are. While, as already mentioned, this can be frustrating, it fits within the idea that contemporary masculinities need to be studied through poststructuralism and feminist theories, as opposed to the more prevailing structuralist frameworks. BDSM roles and gender performances can appear contradictory, however, as it is discussed in the analysis chapters, these contradictions themselves tell us about how people experience gender and expectations that might not align with their identities.

Apart from the theoretical contributions, the thesis also has also methodological importance. For the data collection both in person fieldwork and online data collection were performed. The fieldwork was not innovative, as participant observation research into the BDSM scene is a very popular method. Online data collection is also used by researchers, especially considering that BDSM events and parties can be hard to reach if the researcher is an ‘outsider’. However, I have discussed in depth the issues that can arise from in person fieldwork, especially in relation to female researchers and I have provided a frank conversation when it comes to research into a sexual community. Based on some of the academic writing I have read on BDSM (Newmahr, 2011; Turley, 2011), it seemed that participant observation fieldwork can be achieved relatively easy, which was not my reality. My fieldwork was a very difficult, draining and psychologically taxing endeavour. As such I hope, my methodology proves useful for future researchers, and that it can be used as a cautionary tale when it comes to sexuality research.

1. 5. Chapters Synopsis

The thesis seeks to understand men’s identities and practices and, in the process, challenges conventional approaches specifically in relation to men’s engagement with gender relations and sexual practices, through the study of BDSM (Bondage, Dominance,

Submission/ Masochism). With this section I am showing how the chapters would be supporting this aim and showing how I would argue my thesis.

Chapter 2: Literature review

In this chapter I will be looking at the theoretical background that has informed my study. The chapter is divided into four parts. The first one looks at generally the historical process of sexualisation and how it has led to the visibility of sexual platforms, relaxed attitudes surrounding sexual behaviour and gender and sexual performances. Here the feminist debates surrounding the sexualisation of cultures would be presented and how men and masculinities have also become an important aspect of the conversation. In section two the focus is on the theories utilised by Men and Masculinity Studies when discussing masculinities. A feminist and poststructuralist critique are applied to those theories and would aim to review and apply feminist literature in order to attempt the reconfiguration of masculinities and highlights the need for new discourses surrounding gender. Part three is specifically reviewing literature and background theories behind BDSM and would once again apply feminist and poststructuralist theory into the study of this sexual culture. The final part is looking at the contemporary digital platforms where BDSM spaces are occupying. The focus predominantly falls on Tumblr and the censorship on free, safe spaces where people from more marginalised sexual and gender backgrounds could come together and find belonging without judgment. Digital platforms are proving useful in looking at gender performances in general, as well as overarching social processes that can shape people's understanding and challenging of socially acceptable norms (Miller, 2018; Aouragh, 2018; Bluteau, 2021).

Chapter 3. Methodology

This chapter explores the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of the chosen methodology for the study. The ontological and epistemological discourse behind the choice of qualitative methodology would be presented, as well as detailed discussion on the chosen methods themselves (participant observation fieldwork and digital ethnography),

followed by discussion of issues such as reflexivity and ethics. Here I would be critiquing the use of fieldwork research and put into context some of the dangers and issues surrounding fieldwork in relation to researchers who do not fit within the modernist aspirations of what a 'researcher' should be. I will be showing how dangerous a fieldwork can be for female researchers and would apply postcolonial critique on the perceived 'whiteness' and 'maleness' of the image of the 'Anthropologist'. Feminist and intersectional critiques would be utilised in order to call for changes in the way anthropological and field research are being performed.

Chapter 4. Dirty, Messy, Sexy: Problematizing gender performances through and within the BDSM scene

In this first analysis chapter, I am starting chronologically with discussing the data that was obtained in the early stages of the physical fieldwork performed in the general UK BDSM scene. This chapter starts as an overview on the general UK BDSM community and starts to bring and conceptualize some of the issues that were encountered throughout the study. Here I have attempted to show how 'messy' gender performances are within the scene and that we need to have a contextual understanding on the way BDSM roles work within the scene itself (such as dominance, submission, master, slave, switches, etc.). Based on the data, the argument presented here is that BDSM overall does break gender binary and heteronormative understanding, however, at the same time BDSM events can be geared towards couples and binary bonding. Furthermore, issues such as transphobia within the scene would also be discussed as unfortunately transmisogyny specifically can happen and some female oriented events have been marketed towards cis women.

Chapter 5. Analysing Online Dominance, Submission and Masculinities: Challenging and Enforcing Gender Relations through Eroticism

In this chapter, the analysis focuses on the digital ethnography that was performed during the Covid – 19 pandemic. The discourse presented is on submission and dominance in men and masc presenting BDSM practitioners and how patriarchal relations can be both

challenged and reinforced. The analysis on submission specifically focuses on the idea of the 'sub' as the one in power and the traditional masculinist discourse surrounding the description of submissive men. The analysis on 'dominance' would be done by looking at the neoliberal, sensual 'Alpha' Dominant and how class relations can be reinforced through [financial] capitalism and 'erotic capital'. The notion of the sensual Alpha Dom is a unique example on how complicated dominance can be within BDSM and while seemingly challenging patriarchy, it can in fact reinforce it through romanticised notions of masculine strength, eroticism and protection over the often – female submissive partner.

Chapter 6. Love in the times of Coronavirus: Sexual online platforms and negotiating gender

This chapter keeps following the current roles of digital platforms within the BDSM scene. It is argued that younger practitioners are mainly utilising online spaces instead of physical events, which is especially true in the aftermath of the pandemic and the anxieties still associated with it. The chapter follows up on the dominant performances of men and looks at different forms of dominance. It is clear that younger men are finding it harder to connect to more traditional sadistic form of masculinities and new more 'gentler' styles of dominance are emerging. The online data collection uncovered possibility that BDSM roles, and in particular dominance, might be incompatible with traditional and patriarchal masculinity performances, as BDSM requires high levels of emotions, connection and intense feelings. As such, many men are aiming to break up with the idea of 'toxic masculinity' within BDSM and show how dominant men might not be able to perform 'true' dominance if they ascribe to the modernist masculinity notions.

Chapter 7: 'Call me by my BDSM name!': Subverting and experiencing gender within BDSM roles

In this final analysis chapter, the analysis comes to natural conclusion and presents a more nuanced and detailed approach to studying submission in men within BDSM. In chapter 5 the submission was introduced, but here newer data is showing the need to start reframing

and challenging how 'submission' is perceived within BDSM. Just like the previous chapter showed the need to start reframing dominance, here we need to also start thinking about how to reconfigure how submission also works. The chapter also discusses issues surrounding consent in connection to the roles of the 'dominant' and 'the submissive' and how often the ability to consent is not applied to the dominant partner which can lead to safety issues and heightened sexual assault issues especially connected to female dominants. Additionally, the chapter takes the notion of gender even further by discussing whether BDSM should be seen as already falling outside of gender and how gendered discourse can be problematic in our understanding of BDSM.

1. 5. Conclusion

This chapter outlined briefly the way the thesis would approach the study of masculinities and sexualities in a specific BDSM context. It is clear that Men and Masculinity studies need updating and avoiding associations with modernism and structuralism, as this might not be the best way of researching masculinities. Instead, the application of reflexive feminist theory and poststructuralism might be currently what MMS are needing in order to destabilize power and patriarchal relations. Unfortunately, while scholars have attempted to call out and bridge the gap between feminist studies and masculinity studies (e.g. Beasley, 2013; 2015; Waling, 2019; Butler, 1992) there still is an aversion in placing masculinities within feminist theory. My research attempts to synthesize different approaches and to showcase how useful BDSM can be in the study of masculinities. With the following chapter I would be presenting an in-depth theoretical criticism on masculinity theories, as well as the historical process of sexualisation and BDSM theories. My thesis would also fill in some of the theoretical gaps in BDSM, considering that men and masculinities have not been researched often and discourses on them are largely missing in the BDSM academic literature.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Between Pleasure, Pain and Power: Theorizing Masculinities through BDSM and the Modern Day Sexualisation of Cultures

'We have learned to cherish different cultures as unique expressions of human inventiveness... We need a similarly anthropological understanding of different sexual cultures.'

Rubin, 1998 [1984]:111

2. 1. Introducing the Literature

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the ways through which men negotiate gender relations and tries to understand men's identities and practices. Furthermore, BDSM has been selected for the thesis since BDSM could be understood as an important 'postmodern sexual culture' defined through its fluid and transgressive nature that allows for various gender forms and interactions to take place (Meeker, 2013). BDSM is eliciting interest both in the general public and academia, mainly transgressing its former association as just 'kinky sex' (Barker, 2013).

The thesis argues that the popularization of BDSM as a significant social and sexual space that can bring people together and provide a sense of belonging and identity might be due to the process of sexualisation. As such, I am arguing that the process of sexualisation has developed the popularization of BDSM (which is a practice that has existed in its current form at least since the mid-20th century, especially concerning the gay leather culture, something that would be discussed in the following sections). In order to map out the development of BDSM and its relationship with gender identities, we need to discuss the process of sexualisation.

The literature review aims to show the limitations and the most valuable approaches in the studies concerning masculinities, BDSM and sexualisation. The chapter is divided into three

parts. The first part will define the process of sexualisation, explain why it is crucial to consider it in relation to BDSM and address the inattention to men in the literature on sexualisation. The second part will outline the gaps in masculinity research, and a new theoretical framework will be proposed and its application through the study of BDSM. The final part will provide an overview of BDSM and its importance in accounting for the contingency of masculinities and male sexual identities.

2. 2. Sexualisation and the discourses on sex and pleasure

This section looks at the process of sexualisation, which is a complex historical development encapsulating various social changes and movements (Attwood, 2006). The purpose of this section is to provide a context through which an understanding of the dynamics of the relationship between masculinities and BDSM can be better understood.

Sexualisation is a somewhat underdeveloped term, characterised by unclear definitions and opposing discourses (Duschinsky, 2013). It seems that most of the time when different parties use the term 'sexualisation,' they are not even talking about the same thing, which is attributed to the fact that a clear definition is never present (Gill, 2012). Sexualisation may have various explanations, which would not be covered here. Instead, the focus would fall on the two most prevalent explanations: Sexualisation can either be used to describe the growing importance of sex and sexual behaviours in Western societies (Lerum and Dworkin, 2009) or is used as synonymous with unwanted sexual objectification imposed on young people, usually women (e.g. The APA Task Force; Garner, 2012).

Possibly one of the earliest points where the term sexualisation was used in association with a growing social phenomenon can be found in Spanier (1975), who describes something called *sexual socialisation*, or shortened *sexualisation*. In general, Spanier aimed to show that sexualisation is a social process through which young people start making sense of their sexualities and sexual behaviours and make decisions regarding their sexual lives.

However, the term started gaining momentum as a feminist discourse on the sexual dangers young girls were facing (see Duschinsky, 2013 for the historical commentary). Here we have the media popularisation of the term with newspaper articles such as Schiro's (1981) article

on children's cosmetics, where she uses sexualisation as a negative, sexist term to describe society's obsession with making women sexually desirable.

Later ideas about sexualisation, based on McNair (2002), became an umbrella term to describe how important sex and the sexual were becoming and how this was helping women's empowerment. In Attwood (2006) similarly, we have sexualisation as the growing preoccupation with sex and its forms, and it is treated as an abstract process that is divorced from the terms 'negative' and 'positive'. It goes beyond gender and should not be limited to power, oppression and sexism discourses.

However, the sexualisation studies pose several limitations to understanding the relationship between masculinities and BDSM, as well as more complex gender relations. Sexualisation could not escape its association with female objectification, patriarchy and sexism. In Levy (2005) sexualisation takes away female sexuality, transforms it into something men desire and hands it back to women in the disguise of sexual liberation.

Gill (2012) argues against an abstract view of sexualisation and maintains that the sexualisation process is viewed in a very narrow sense, in that it is assumed to affect everyone in the same way and ignores the issues it poses. Instead, she states that:

'I will turn my attention to the debates about 'sexualization' and 'pornification' more generally and ask why they have become so divorced from discussions of sexism, racism, homophobia or other axes of oppression. Despite the language of empowerment, discussion of power seems curiously absent.' (2012: 737).

What Gill aims to achieve is to go beyond the binary of 'negatives' and 'positives' when it comes to the sexualisation debates, take the moral panics out, and turn towards more political and 'gendered' sexualisation discourses. In her view, this would help to analyse how sexualisation targets people and how they actively participate in it simultaneously, especially concerning women and more marginalised sexual groups (2012).

As demonstrated from the reviewed literature, the most common discourse on the sexualisation of cultures is whether the process is sexually empowering for women or degrading for women (e.g., Thompson and Donaghue, 2014). In this sense, sexualisation has been trapped in binary definitions and notions of purity, danger, innocence, and healthy

female sexuality (Carline, 2011). This is why two distinct categories have emerged in the studies of sexualisation – the category of the oppressed victims (the heterosexual young women) and the category of the oppressors (the heterosexual men) (Duschinsky and Barker, 2012).

As a follow-up, most studies on the sexualisation of cultures have become exclusively associated with women and their preservation, thus mainly excluding cis/transgender men, transgender women and LGBT+ groups from the discourse (Attwood, 2018). As Albury and Byron (2014) put it, this is likely because sexualisation debates have turned into ‘heterosexualisation’ debates because of the obsession to portray the negativity experienced by straight young girls victimized by men. As has been identified by Robinson et al. (2014), in schools and health facilities, there is general ignorance about the sexuality of non – heterosexual and queer students, with students reporting having been ‘sexualised, with teachers and peers making assumptions about their sexuality and treating them differently on the basis of these assumptions.’ (2014:30). As it is vivid from these young people’s experiences, there is a general view that they are already sexual and defined by their sexuality, thus not innocent and in no need of protection. Specifically, across media platforms, transgender men get treated similarly to cisgender men in that they are assumed to be sexual and even predatory, while transgender women get ascribed either the role of the victim or are seen as deceptive and comical (Attwood et al., 2013). Since these people do not fit the narrative of purity and innocence, their sexual experiences become marginalised, highly misunderstood, and not amid the moral panic imposed by anti – sexualisation advocates (Gill, 2012).

Considering this, I propose a definition of the sexualisation of cultures, drawing upon Attwood and Smith (2015). The definition of sex provided by Attwood and Smith (2015) can help build a better theoretical framework on sexualisation. Sex can be seen as a form of leisure that is not just hedonistic, playful, entertaining and frivolous (casual leisure) but also helpful and significant for the wellbeing of individuals and societies and the development of skills and knowledge to help communities (serious leisure) (Attwood and Smith, 2015). Moving away from sex from casual leisure and pinning it down as serious leisure is more accurate for describing twenty-first-century sex (Attwood and Smith, 2015). Denying sex as being part of the serious leisure category is to deny the ‘role that sex has played in official

and non – institutional discourses of marriage and romance, of the sexual revolution, of identity formation, identity politics, religious, moral revivalism, campaigns against pornification and sexualisation’ (2015: 330).

In this sense, I propose that the sexualisation discourse should move away from the issues of empowerment and oppression, and instead, the focus should turn towards the constantly changing notions of desire, sexual variabilities and identities, and the way people make sense of these changes in their everyday lives. As seen from Attwood and Smith's (2015) argument, sex has played a significant and unprecedented role in the building of modern Western societies, and since sexualisation stems directly from sex, it should also be defined in terms of its importance in societies. Then sexualisation becomes a fluid, multi-layered process that encapsulates the social changes and movements made possible due to the more visible engagement with sex and sexual behaviour (Kehily, 2012; McNair, 2002). Some of these social processes include the more visible gender fluidness and the less stigma surrounding different sexualities, sexual expressions and ways of being sexual; the creation of common practices that bring people together beyond heteronormative bonding; the wider distribution and use of pornography; the mainstreaming of stripping and its access to everyone and the popularisation of once seen as pathological and criminal sexual platforms, such as BDSM (Attwood, 2009). After all, sex as a postmodernist discourse (Simon, 1992) should be studied in terms of its plurality and transgressive nature, which would also account for the sexualisation’s fluid nature that goes beyond gender, danger and oppression.

Widening the horizon of sexualisation can help us understand the effects sexualisation has had on a broader scale of people and communities from various sexual and gender backgrounds. In the context of this thesis, the focus will be predominantly on men and the way contemporary masculinities are being manifested in terms of the growing sexual cultures, considering that adequate framings of male sexualities are still largely missing (Beasley, 2015). The BDSM scene was selected to explore masculinities since it has been described as a liberating sexual platform that breaks the heteronormative and gender binaries regarding sexual behaviour (Beckmann, 2001). BDSM is a place where people can freely negotiate and enact their desires with as little stigma as possible (Beckmann, 2001), thus proving crucial for studying men and masculinities in terms of sexual behaviour.

*2. 2. 1. Sex, Virgins, Sluts, Men and Deviants – How far have we **not** gone?*

The obsession found within the literature with sexualisation and its effect on women can be attributed mainly to the early 80s, when feminist research aimed to disseminate pornography and erotic media in order to trace its impact on women and see whether they could lead to sexual liberation or upkeep the sexism (Rubin, 2011). Since then, within the anti-sexualisation debates, there has been an underlying assumption that men are always responsive to sex and highly sexual, thus subjecting women to their desires; women, on the other hand, are assumed to be pure and less sexual and have to be shielded from the 'dirty' influence of the growing sexualisation (Clark and Duschinsky, 2018).

It has been proposed that the main issue with the anti-sexualisation is this 'gendering' of the process (Smith, 2018; Barker and Duschinsky, 2012). Newmahr (2011) argues that research on sexualisation and its different forms tend to get heavily gendered because it is assumed women suffer from it since sexualisation is treated as a sexist, oppressive tool. On the other hand, studies on sexual risks and being on the 'edge' (so called edgeworks) are men centred and revolve around masculinity, with women being largely ignored and not discussed in terms of undertaking sexual behaviours (Newmahr, 2011). As Newmahr puts it,

'The edgework paradigm has been constrained by gender, limiting its applicability to women (among others), women's spaces, and women's voluntary and intentional risk taking. The notion of edgework has been built on values of conventional hegemonic masculinities, including individualism, independence and self-reliance [...] and a romantic dichotomous tension between the wilderness and civilization' [2011: 689].

In this sense, men are being seen as sexually adventurous, risky and naturally sexual, and they symbolically represent the 'wilderness'; while women are not assumed to be sexual, they are seen as unavailable to take risks, they are the civilization and in need of protection (Morris, 2008).

It could be argued that the noted binary divide between representations of women's and men's sexual desire is one of the explanations for why the presence of men and

masculinities are very limited in the discussions. The inattention within the literature on men in the discourse on sexualisation has been noted for a while now, and studies have tried to shift the attention to masculinities, especially in the past few years (Clark, 2013; Clark and Duschinsky, 2018). It is not that men are not mentioned in the literature; the issue is that they are always on the periphery as the consumers of pornography, striptease and objectified female depictions (McKee, 2018).

In this sense, there is a state of fixed masculine and sexual roles that men are assumed to always undertake concerning sex (Liong and Chang, 2018; Boynton, 2009). However, as Sloan has argued:

‘sexual desire, is not a purely instinctual impulse with a definitive object, singular means of fulfilment, or invaluable function in relationships. Rather, its orientation, pleasure, and potential for self-expression emerge as individuals navigate the connotations of certain behaviours through performing social roles’. (2015: 550)

Here Sloan draws heavily upon Foucault and post – structuralism in that sexual behaviours and orientations get prescribed to people in relation to their gender, class, race, and age and are socially scripted (2015). I would argue this is precisely the issue with presenting male sexual identities and desires – men get ascribed fixed sexual behaviours based on essentialism and assumed patriarchally structured violence and unlimited sexual appetite. Then the implication is that male sexuality is always negative and cannot exist without devouring female sexuality (Tuck, 2009). For example, male masturbation, as argued by Tuck (2009), is usually depicted as negative overconsumption that relies on visual stimuli, such as pornography and voyeurism, which reduce women to objects. As he writes:

I have been unable to locate any unequivocally positive or even unconcerned representations of heterosexual male masturbation in mainstream texts. Furthermore, many of the most negative representations of male masturbation show the abuse or consumption of another during the act, and other people, especially women, are turned into little more than pornographic props (2009: 90)

In contrast, female masturbation is more championed because it does not involve the consumption of another person, but it is said to rely predominantly on erotic fiction stories, fantasies and toys (ibid: 90). Watching pornography is not associated with women as much

as with men; the implication is that men have less imagination and always need visual stimuli (ibid_.

Another issue to consider is the literature's obsession with genitals and, more specifically, the penis, in that heterosex always becomes dependent on penile coitus, thus seen as male-centred ('phallic') hence negative (Karioris and Alan, 2017). Karioris and Alan (2017) argue that various sexual practices, such as S/M (somasochism) and BDSM, are not necessarily centred around genitals and coital orgasm instead, the whole body and its various parts can contribute to pleasure and sex becomes relational. They further argue that, 'we have aimed to open a conversation regarding the testicles, to remove from primacy the penis and the phallic representation that more often than not has captured our attention[...]the growing field of men's studies or critical studies of men and masculinities has only just begun to think through notions and possibilities of the body, embodiment, and corporeality, drawing largely on queer and feminist theory' (ibid, p: 256). We can connect this to Halperin (1995), who in examining the Foucauldian vision of S/M, stresses how this sexual practice transforms the whole body into an erogenous zone. Similarly, in her research into BDSM and the embodiment of desire, Emma Turley (2016) explains that genital sex is not essential within BDSM; instead, the whole body becomes a sexual organ, and the participants have a very holistic understanding of desire.

There is an overlap of the categories, which has been noticed at the beginning of the anti/pro sexualisation debates and might be helpful to explain the continued gendering of sexualisation (Vance and Snitow, 1984). Vance and Snitow (1984) note that sexuality and gender should always be kept apart as much as possible, and sexuality should not be treated as a subcategory of gender, thus, gender cannot be used to explain sex and sexual behaviour. We are still being cautioned that sexualisation and sexuality should be studied beyond gender and move past the focus on male/female domination (Attwood, 2006; Smith, 2009). In order to break with the established dichotomous categories of oppressors/victims, we have to reconsider the way masculinities have been theorised and move away from the pervasive notion of male sexual desire equating danger. It has been proposed (Beasley, 2013) that the limitation in how masculinities are presented in the study of sexualisation is to do with the theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinities.

2. 3. Examining the theoretical framework in Masculinities

This thesis looks at the ways that BDSM impact upon men and their identities. However, existing theories utilised for the study on sexualization dovetail with work on sexualisation in that men and their practices have become conceptually contained (Haywood and an Ghail, 2022). This containment restricts the possibilities of how gender and sexuality can be reconfigured. This section explores this containment in more detail. I propose that this containment issues might be due to the theoretical framework of 'hegemonic masculinities'. As such, we would first need to investigate the concept of 'hegemony' and outline some of the inconsistencies in the current theoretical frameworks of masculinities. This should aid us in our examination of issues surrounding male sexualities. This is important because it might help us move the discourse on male sexualities beyond the violence and danger toward women. This section critically explores the concept of 'hegemonic' masculinity and argues that this theoretical approach might be too limiting and vague to account for the contemporary representations of masculinities. As such, a reconfiguration of the way hegemony is defined might be helpful, but to do this, I am presenting a discourse on the term hegemony to critically explore its political, social and eventually gendered connotations.

We will start with the concept of hegemony since masculinities tend to be studied in light of Connell's influential works *Gender and Power* (1987) and its further development *Masculinities* (2005[1995]), where she developed the notion of multiple masculinities and hegemonic masculinity. Masculinities were treated as flexible, context and history-dependent, which means masculinities are not static but ever-changing (2005 [1995]). Connell recognises five kinds of masculinities that I would map out here. I believe this is important in order to present the base of my criticism. The five types of masculinities are as follows: hegemonic, subordinated, complicit, marginalised and protest masculinities which, are not fixed types. In Connell's definition, hegemonic masculinity is 'the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.' (2005[1995]: 77). The concept of hegemonic masculinity was

introduced to describe the most desired and ideal masculinity at a time when all other masculinities position themselves (Connell, 2005 [1995]). Then we have subordinated masculinities that are actively oppressed and dominated by the hegemonic masculinities, with the most famous example being, according to Connell, the masculinities expressed by gay men (2005). Complicit masculinities are practised by men who are not necessarily sexist or agree with dominance and oppression but nevertheless benefit from patriarchy (2005). Connell uses marginalisation to describe the interplay between race and class, so marginalised masculinities can be examples of hegemonic masculinities only because the dominant group is authorising them. Protest masculinities are those who actively fight against the hegemonic ideal, challenge the imposed gender norms and strive for equality (2005).

Connell's hegemonic masculinity concept has mainly been challenged, misinterpreted and critiqued due to its synonymous use as a type of negative, toxic, sexist and deeply patriarchal masculinity that exists in opposition to femininities and other non-patriarchal masculinities (Everitt – Penhale and Ratele, 2015). As seen from the above discussion, Connell stresses that hegemony is a mobile relation that embodies the most accepted strategy to be a man at a particular time, thus, hegemony can be challenged and changed (2005[1995]). In this sense, hegemonic masculinity is a dominant strategy and hierarchically positions itself above other masculinities and femininities.

Later in *Masculinities*, however, the concept of hegemonic masculinity becomes quite confusing and used differently than initially stated. Connell uses the term 'hegemonic masculinity' as a type of negative masculinity, which goes directly against her initial definition, where hegemonic masculinity is not a type of masculinity but represents whatever type of masculinity is dominant at a given time.

An example of this is when she contrasts hegemonic masculinity as a type of masculinity that is the opposite of homosexual masculinity and oppresses the latter: 'the relation between hegemonic and homosexual masculinity has involved the criminalization of male – to – male sex, as well as intimidation and violence' (2005 [1995]: 154 – 155). Connell has been criticized for the irregular use of 'hegemonic masculinity' (see Martin, 1998) and has admitted the confusion herself, maintaining that hegemonic masculinity should indeed be treated as a strategy, not a type (Connell, 1998). As she writes:

Martin is quite right that the term hegemonic masculinity has come to have more than one meaning. When my colleagues (Tim Carrigan and John Lee) and I were first trying to define it, we thought of hegemony as a situation, which arose in history and could change in history. But in some writing since, the term has come to stand for a fixed character type, something like a Type A personality-and almost always with negative connotations. I must take some responsibility for this. The term is defined in relation to the legitimacy of patriarchy. Although I have tried to be consistent in defining it historically, in some usages I refer in a shorthand way to hegemonic masculinity when the topic is men behaving badly (with respect to gender equality). And this gives an opening to the notion of a fixed negative character type. But I do think it possible for hegemony to be a positive force (1998: 475, 476).

Nevertheless, in her later works (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), hegemonic masculinity is still discussed in light of toxic masculinity, which is reflected in much of the literature on masculinities. For example, Kupers argues based on Connell that:

‘hegemonic masculinity [...] includes a high degree of ruthless competition, an inability to express emotions other than anger [...] devaluation of women and all feminine attributes in men, homophobia, and so forth[...]toxic masculinity is constructed out of those aspects of hegemonic masculinity that foster domination of others and are, thus, socially destructive.’ (2005: 716; 717).

Here toxic masculinity emerges out of hegemonic masculinity, while in Hess and Flores (2018) and Greenebaum and Dexter (2017), hegemonic masculinity *is* hypermasculinity defined as toxic masculinity. This shows the inconsistencies in using the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’. In the case of Hess and Flores and Greenebaum and Dexter, hegemonic masculinity becomes just a specific narrow type of masculinity that is ontologically negative.

In order to outline the limitations posed by the concept of hegemonic masculinity, one must first untangle the term ‘hegemony’ and its political and historical use. While the term has immense popularity and uses nowadays, it was not until the middle of the 20th century that it emerged as an important concept in social theory (Haugaard and Lentner, 2006). Even though the notion of hegemony was created in Hellenistic times, it went into oblivion until it

got reintroduced by Gramsci in the early 20th century (Fontana 2006). The word *hegemon* from Greek means a leader of a military alliance that cities have entered voluntarily; hegemon was also used as the polis that was the leader of two or more other polies (Howson 2006; Lentner, 2005). The citizens of the polies were free and independent of one another; hegemony was seen as different and opposed to dominance and imperialism and represented true equal alliances (Haugaard and Lentner, 2006). Within Gramscian theorization, hegemony represents the equilibrium between civil society and political society (that is, leadership and dominance) with persuasion and direction, not force (Gramsci, 1975; Lawner, 1975). There are three types of hegemonic rule in the Gramscian sense, as argued by Femia (1981) – the bourgeoisie hegemony (decadent hegemony), the proletariat hegemony (integral hegemony) and minimal hegemony. The first hegemony is largely negative in that it legitimizes power that only seemingly represents the common interest, but mostly it is about the hegemon (the ruling class). In contrast, the second form of hegemony is positive in that it represents the true common interests of all and fully integrates rulers and rules with the whole society moving forward (Femia, 1989). Additionally, minimal hegemony is about the elites ruling without regard for other classes (Femia, 1981).

Even though Gramsci's account of hegemony seems relatively layered and can take many forms and be acted at various levels, it is mainly structuralist as it 'assumes a particular socio-political structure or order in existence' (Fontana, 2000: 307). In other words, Gramscian hegemony was reduced to universal class relations and hierarchies and was always tied to the proletariat or the bourgeoisie (Thomassen, 2016). It was not until the writings of Laclau and Mouffe (*Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 1985) that the concept of hegemony was grounded in post-structuralism as a complex, deconstructive force without fixation. Gramscian Hegemony up to this point was defined in terms of Marxist theory, in which centre lies the conceptualization of society and history as singular, total and homogenous structures, thus defining hegemony as a political relation to support the structures (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Laclau and Mouffe aimed to show that hegemony goes beyond Marxism (and Gramsci) and reconceptualised it as something that can be seen in all levels of society and expresses the relationships between the social elements, relationships that were subject to constant change (1985). In Mouffe's *On the Political*

(2005), hegemony is seen in terms of 'plurality' and shows that hegemony can be challenged and substituted with other alternatives that will become hegemonic, hence keeping up with the contingency of the concept. He further argues that 'there is no beyond hegemony' (2005: 118), only constantly changing discourses that can assume the role of hegemonic at different times, levels and contexts. As a follow-up, Laclau and Mouffe's concept of hegemony can account for the fluidness of masculinities and help us move away from predicting and generalising patterns. This can also aid us in navigating male sexual practices, which are subject to constant flux.

2. 3. 1. The divide between structuralism and post structuralism

Considering this post-structural outline of hegemony and specifically the writings of Laclau and Mouffe, one can see that in the concept of hegemonic masculinities as implemented by Connell, hegemony is somewhat limited in its flexibility (Howson, 2007). It is essential to avoid the prevailing tendency in which hegemony is seen as a type of masculinity, because as already outlined, hegemony is not a type (Mouffe, 2005). In revisiting the term, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and later Messerschmidt (2012) consider some of the proposed criticisms on hegemonic masculinity and aim to clarify the term. They argue that hegemonic masculinity should not be perceived as negative at all times, and the emergence of positive hegemonic masculinities should be fully considered; these are hegemonic masculinities that will be about breaking hierarchical relations and power and enforcing equality between men and women (2005: 853). In her earlier reply to the criticisms of hegemonic masculinity, Connell (1998: 476) also posits that positive hegemonic masculinities are possible since 'it is quite conceivable that a certain hegemony could be constructed for masculinities that are less toxic, more cooperative and peaceable'. However, positive hegemonic masculinities become a paradox, considering that for Connell and Messerschmidt and later Messerschmidt (2012), hegemonic masculinities keep being tightly connected to the harmful exercise of power over femininities. So how can this ever be positive? Groes – Green (2012) argues that the way Connell constructs hegemonic masculinity cannot provide accounts for positive hegemonic forms because there is always the pervasive association of hegemonic with negative. Drawing on an ethnography in Mozambique, Africa, he introduces

the concept of philogynous (women loving) masculinities which are about equal gender relations and opposing misogyny. However, at the same time, they reproduce some of the more positive traditional values of being a man in order for these masculinities to be accepted. In a way, the philogynous masculinities fit and depart from Connell's hegemonic model because even though they are seen as the best way to be a man and are enacted by men in more powerful positions, they are not desired by most men (Groes – Green, 2012). What can be seen from Groes – Green's example is that it is difficult for masculinities to be always trapped in structures and models and to have predicting patterns. As Groes – Green argues:

Although Connell clearly leaves room for alternative masculinities, these are primarily defined in negative terms, as male practices and ideals that are subordinated to more hegemonic forms and therefore it remains unclear how philogynous and gender equitable masculinities might develop [...] [t]his confirms the need to develop concepts that explicitly point to gender equitable masculinities. (2012: 95).

In short, Connell's model is too generalising and vague to allow alternatives, and the structural relationship of patriarchy continues to be the general dynamic of how hegemony takes place. Ambiguities happen because hegemonic masculinities are tightly related to a negative type of masculinities. For example, Messerschmidt (2012) argues that there is a difference between dominant, dominating and hegemonic masculinities in that the first two are possible to exist without subjecting women to their power, however, the third (hegemonic) cannot exist without perpetuating patriarchy (2012: 73). Even though it seems that hegemonic is not a type anymore, it is only used to describe a particular type of masculinities – the ones that enforce patriarchy. In this sense, patriarchy, a system of social relations characterised by male domination and binary separation between men and women with prescribed social roles (Stuart, 1994), relies on hegemonic masculinities.

In Messerschmidt's view (2012), the dominant becomes the positive as opposed to the hegemonic, which carries out the negative ideals of a society. However, in the original concept, hegemony is opposed to dominant in that it is seen as leadership that enforces the morality which is seen as ideal at the time (Fontana, 2006). Indeed, this morality might as well be negative, so hegemonic masculinities would employ negativity in certain instances,

however, it is important to note that they can also employ positive morale that is not always about subjecting women to men's power (Groes – Green, 2012). Despite the reformulations, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) still treat hegemony in a very narrow sense, and the concept of hegemonic masculinities cannot quite go beyond typology, which means that hegemonic masculinities describe only a set type of negative behaviours that men are assumed to exhibit. The concept is rarely employed to account for the originally intended desired strategy to be a man at a given time.

This limited use of hegemony as a fixed, vast structure that reinforces hierarchical relations between masculinities and femininities has been attributed to the fact that Connell bases her theory entirely on Gramsci's structural definition of hegemony (Laclau and Mouffe are never mentioned in her works). Thus the concept of hegemonic masculinities has been trapped in structuralism and modernism, which is why it cannot account for any antagonisms within masculinities (Johansson and Ottemo, 2015).

Structuralism is vivid in the way power is identified by Connell (2005[1995]); power in her vision is something held by the men expressing hegemonic masculinities, and power in this sense becomes structural oppression that is owned by the subjects (Beasley, 2013). In contrast, within post-structuralism, as based on Foucault:

‘power is not to be taken to be a phenomenon of one individual's consolidated and homogeneous domination over others, or that of one group or class over others [...] power must be analysed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in the form of a chain...power is employed and exercised through a netlike organization [...] individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application’.
(1980: 98)

Connell herself argued against the post-structuralist discourses on power at the time, explaining that this type of research does not explain economic inequality and gendered power relations among men (2005: xviii, xix). However, Foucault addresses the issue that power relations might stabilise due to the creation of institutions, codes and courts to stop resistance (1998: 169). This can explain some of the power relations Connell argues for without power becoming a possessed tool of oppression; indeed, institutions might aim to fix power, and there might even be violence or forceful coercion, however, since power is

highly mobile, it circulates through all levels of society and can be conducted by everyone which means that there will always be resistance (Foucault, 1998; 1980). Within Connell's theorization, hegemonic masculinity holds power and enacts straightforward domination, and it is not very clear how resistance can happen and how this domination can ever be broken.

Since masculinities are studied through Connell's hegemonic masculinity framework and how she identifies power in a very classical modernist and structuralist way, Beasley argues (2013) that generally, the overall masculinity studies cannot escape this framework which means a significant departure from post-structuralism and feminism. Poststructuralist thinkers in feminism aim to deconstruct power, which also leads to the destabilization of fixed gender identities and oppression (Johansson and Ottemo, 2015; Beasley, 2015; 2013), however, some scholars such as Jeff Hearn argue that instead of talking about hegemonic masculinities, we should move the discussion towards the 'hegemony of men' (2012: 549; 2005: 49) and their power to oppress and adds that men should be studied through their gender (2005: 51). Hearn's claims would mean that men's gender is always connected to violence and power and always opposed to women who become a fixed category of oppressed victims. Hearn's theoretical framework implies that male dominance and patriarchy can never be destabilized, which is not what feminism and post-structuralism are about (Beasley, 2015).

We are left with certain paradoxes, considering the inconsistent use of hegemony. For example, as Johansson and Ottemo (2015) argued, if we go back to Laclau and Mouffe and accept that there is nothing beyond hegemony, by following the established framework of hegemonic masculinities, this would mean that there is nothing beyond patriarchy and oppression. We can even expand this more in that if hegemony encompasses the ultimate ideals and morale at a given time (Mouffe, 2005), but we hold onto Connell's hegemonic masculinity premise, then the ultimate morale and ideal for men at all times would be the legitimizing of patriarchy and subordination of women, and that is what men have to struggle to achieve.

In order to avoid such ambiguities and inconsistencies, we need to go beyond this structuralist view and implement a poststructuralist feminist theory on the study of masculinities and hegemony, drawing upon Laclau and Mouffe. In this sense, hegemonic

masculinity should not be this vast, monolithic and fixed one-dimensional process or a type defined by the structures of patriarchy but a multidimensional concept that allows for the emergence of different practices and identities (Garlick, 2016). To sum up, I propose that if we keep using hegemony within the studies of masculinities, the concept should allow the fluid nature of masculine identities and practices, and it should also represent what is influential and prominent at a given time, space and context and as such should not be treated as something that perpetuates patriarchal masculinities at all times.

However, even if hegemony gets reconceptualised, are we resolving the issues of fixed structures or are we enforcing them even more? Should the concept of hegemony and hegemonic masculinities be entirely left behind to move towards the more fluid, layered and changing masculinities that are not subject to predicting patterns and structures? At this point, it might be difficult to break up with hegemony since the term is so popular and intertwined with masculinities but reformulating hegemony in order to allow the contingency of masculinities might be a good place to start.

An interesting approach in the study of masculinities is offered by Fox and Alldred (2013; 2015), who building upon Deleuze and Guattari (1988; 1984), use the sexuality – assemblage framework in order to explain masculinities and sexual experiences. The concept of sexuality – assemblage is blurring the lines between micro and macro, intimacy and public and is about the bodies' desires at a particular time, space and scenario (2013; 2015). Everything is relational when it comes to the sexual, and everything is assembled together to produce the events and reality; a kiss is not just lips touching each other – a kiss constitutes a relation between psychological, physiological, social and personal, the settings, the place, the memories, the norms and the experience (2015). Sexuality has nothing to do with 'personal preferences or dispositions and everything to do with how bodies, things, ideas and social institutions assemble. Territorialising forces produce body compartments, identities and subjectivities, 'masculinity' and 'femininity'; and shape sexual desires, attractions, preferences' (Fox and Alldred, 2015: 909). We can argue here that instead of capturing masculinities in fixed structures we should start thinking of identities and masculinities in terms of how relational they are and how differently produced they can be.

Here I would also like to mention Moffatt's work in contemporary masculinities, which I believe fits with the proposed theoretical frameworks. Moffatt's work (2019) has inspired

me as he looks at the different ways of negotiating masculinities in the changing urban setting and globalization; that is, the various ways of resisting and creating environments for practicing masculinities and negotiating men's identities. The notion of single 'maleness' has been widely challenged here, and we have multiple ways of creating masculinities. The author aims to show how gender is being influenced by various social factors such as class, ethnicity, and sexuality. The notion of *altmodern* is used to define the new sociocultural reality marked by the plurality. The setting used throughout the book is the Canadian urban setting, and it is not to suggest that environment is the root cause of the multiplicity of expressions but rather to map the terrain of masculinity in an urban setting marked by global forces.

There is also the idea to move the men away from the 'clean unchanged' body that is beyond social scrutiny and has been guarded, unlike the female body that has been subjected to society's desire to control since it is seen as impure where we can draw upon Kristeva (1982). The point is to immerse the masculine body in the messiness and to subject it to grotesque and shameful visions, just like with women's bodies. In this sense, it has been argued that female bodies are generally seen as unclean, 'horrifying' and impure (Weiss, 2016; Kristeva, 1982). Male bodies historically have been regarded as cleaner and purer, so they should not be subject to change and have been protected (Dummitt, 2011). This is extended to masculinities that cannot possibly change since men should not change (Connell, 1995).

Moffatt (2019) looks at how men negotiate masculinities in contemporary settings and considers issues such as globalization, digitality, class and ethnicity. Moffatt also cautions about the use of hegemonic masculinity since it is not ever-present and is not an overarching entity because men would express masculinities depending on the social situation; he appeals to masculinities and pluralities. As Moffatt argues:

Hegemony is also maintained through epistemological constructs. One such combines concepts associated with identity – 'authenticity, objectivity, universalism and essentialism' – to construct a hegemonic male identity. This epistemology serves a strategy of power that protects the sphere of male dominance, in particular that of white and middle-class men. Since these four concepts, in conjunction, construct a form of masculinity that lies outside the play of historical social relations, they rely

on a faulty logic to create their concept of the masculine. Since masculinity is assumed to be static, it is also assumed to be immutable (2019: 8)

In short, Hegemony is constructed through epistemology; one epistemological construct employs concepts such as authenticity, essentialism, universality, and objectivity to maintain powered positions for certain men (Moffatt, 2019). However, these concepts lie outside masculinities; that is, they do not correspond to what masculinities are in reality: 'But essentialist definitions of masculinity and unitary forms of masculine practice are not relevant to lived experience. At best, the idealized coherence implied by this paradigm of masculinity merely addresses conundrums in a simplified fashion. At worst, they obscure troubling social relations based in gender.' (Moffatt, 2019: 8).

In this sense, such social constructs aim to keep hegemony, but the essentialist, universalist and authentic narratives do not correspond to the actual lived experience of men and the way they construct masculinities. Masculinity is seen as static. Moffatt's theorization on masculinities is interesting as it considers the contemporary world we are inhabiting. Considering processes like globalization, migration, the expansion of digital spaces, and breaking cultural barriers, men are much less likely to conform to rigid boundaries associated with identity and nationality. The way men might experience their 'masculinities' is denoted by race, class, and sexuality; unfortunately, how masculinities are theorized through modernism, and Connell leaves little room for interpretation and acknowledgement of the lived experiences of men and the 'messiness' associated with gender.

Now that we have proposed development of the theoretical framework in masculinities, we should look at whether this can be tested 'in practice'. My research found that through the study of BDSM, we can see whether we can identify any hegemonic practices or discourses and see whether they are universal patterns or should be understood in terms of context and flexibility instead. Furthermore, the issue with male sexualities and their conflation with aggression, oppression and danger might also be resolved through BDSM which offers a sufficient ground for the study of gender performances and, specifically, for the manifestations of masculinities (MCoun, et al, 2006).

2. 4. Pleasure and Pain: Background and Theory in BDSM

The concept of sexualisation was discussed in the first part of the chapter as a growing social process that might be best understood through serious leisure and transgression in that it has helped break down boundaries and illuminate and shape various sexual activities.

So what exactly is BDSM? Is it a type of sexuality? Is it a way of life? Is it a space where people perform freely, otherwise deemed inappropriate, sexual behaviours? Is it just kinky sex? In a way, BDSM is all of these since it is very person and context-dependent (Hebert and Weaver, 2014). The abbreviation of 'BDSM' stands for Bondage, Dominance, Submission and Sadism/Masochism. It serves to describe various consensual practices such as leather, kink, power play and exchange, master/slave relationships, pain/pleasure practices (Simula and Sumerau, 2019), as well as a particular type of sexual orientation (Holt, 2016). BDSM is a recent acronym to describe what before was referred to as S/M (Rye et al., 2015). S/M (from sadism/masochism) has a double meaning – it can be used to describe the entire scene as a synonym to BDSM, and it is also used to describe a particular aspect of BDSM which is sadomasochism, also sometimes known as 'sensation play' and 'pain play' (Weiss, 2011). For this thesis, I will use 'BDSM' and 'S/M' interchangeably to account for the scene's diversity.

BDSM has often been described as a 'subculture' in the literature (e.g. Clark and Stiles, 2011; Holt, 2017; Barker et al., 2007). However, I would argue that the terms 'scene' might be better in defining BDSM. Redhead (1993) noted that the subcultural theory was no longer viable to account for the mixing and dissolution of the communities, labelled as 'subcultures' and later, Bennett and Kahn – Harris (2004) explained that subcultural divisions have broken down significantly due to the destabilization of identities and styles thus giving way to more fluid relationships. Drawing upon Straw (1991) post – subculturists have adopted the term 'scene' as a representation of the post–subcultural turn (Bennett, 2011). For Straw (1991), scenes go beyond the subcultural locality and homogeneity, and he defines them as something that brings people together from various social backgrounds, populations and groups.

Pfadenhauer (2005) extends the framework on scenes and posits that scenes are 'lifestyle communities and as such are not geographically but symbolically, aesthetically and

thematically located "territories" in social space' (Pfadenhauer, 2005: para.12). Scenes in her view are highly interactive communication generators that are characterised by the shared interests of the members; this constant communicative interaction develops complex networks within networks where people can establish deep personal connections (Pfadenhauer, 2005). I would argue that BDSM can be seen as a thematic or symbolic territory where people can meet, bond, engage in common [erotic] activities and interests, perform fantasies and behaviours and maintain personal relationships, thus, it is best understood in terms of a scene. Furthermore, subcultural theory conceptualised subcultures in terms of 'deviancy' (Bennett and Kahn – Harris, 2004), and as discussed below, BDSM may be more than deviant acts.

Dymock argues (2012) that the mainstreaming and normalisation of BDSM is happening, which has raised questions among BDSM practitioners as to whether this is positive or going against everything that BDSM stands for. Practitioners (such as the professional dominatrix Bitchy Jones) have argued that normalising BDSM is to put even more policing on it from legal and psychological bodies and to deny people the sex they crave in that they have to find normalising narratives to justify it; this would mean that you can practice BDSM only if you have a valid reason, which has to be socially acceptable (Dymock, 2012).

For example, a well-known justification that scholars and medical practitioners have widely used to explain female masochism and the engagement in 'rape fantasy' is the so-called 'healing narrative' (Lindemann, 2011). The healing narrative explains that women want to engage in 'problematic practices' because this can help them heal from previous assaults and sexual violations (Barker, 2013). However, such normalising narratives deny the sexual desires that people might have and stigmatise them (Dymock, 2012). It has been argued that this helps the general public to accept BDSM however, this acceptance does not mean that the general public understands BDSM (Dymock, 2012). Often, submissive women and dominant men face general unacceptance and find it difficult to justify their sexual desires if they cannot offer a 'healing narrative' (DeGroot et al., 2014).

Woltersdorff (2012) argues that masochism and submissiveness are socially acceptable when they are accompanied by salvation, empowerment, martyrdom and self – fulfilment but morally outrageous when it is all about sex and pleasure. So, it only makes sense for healing narratives to be reproduced in order for BDSM to be accepted. As Califia noted

(1988), one can always be an apologist for BDSM and present it as non-violent and tame, however, this is to refuse the real nature of BDSM, and in so doing, it emphasizes a commonality with the same vanilla interactions it aims to transgress. Langdridge and Butt (2005: 69, 70) have noted 'that sadomasochistic sexual identities are just too sexual and too transgressive for recognition of the claim for citizenship, then we might just expect a linguistic transformation from sadomasochism to erotic power exchange to transform the possibility of recognition. Nevertheless, this is not without its problems since this still means that there is a very conservative look over sexual citizenship, as Langdridge and Butt warn.

It has been argued (Khan, 2018) that a legitimization from society might happen if BDSM receives a more popularised, 'vanilla oriented' image through which the BDSM communities would largely benefit. Suppose we keep pushing BDSM practices that are relatively 'tame' and unproblematic for the general society, and we maintain focus on how healing and redeeming BDSM is by eliciting sympathy towards the practitioners. In that case, we are not offering a proper understanding of what BDSM is. As Barker (2013: 22) writes: 'Darren rightly pointed out that there was a risk that such 'healing narratives' could reinforce one of the common problematic assumptions about BDSM: that all BDSMers were mentally disordered. If BDSM was healing, didn't that suggest that BDSMers required healing?' Instead, BDSM should be seen, as argued by Foucault (1997: 165), as an instrument for people to create new ways of pleasure: '[w]e know very well what all those people [S/M practitioners] are doing is not aggressive; they are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body-through the eroticization of the body. I think it's a kind of creation, a creative enterprise, which has as one of its main features what I call the desexualization of pleasure.'

Foucault, who was part of the San Francisco S/M community, aimed to expand the limits of bodily pleasure that society largely reduced to eating, drinking and sex (1997: 165). For Foucault, S/M was unique in that it could *desexualize* pleasure and experiment with it, thus also creating and freeing our desires (1997: 165). If we retain Foucault's appeal that sadomasochism creates new possibilities of pleasure and move away from the discourse on misunderstood violence and aggression, then there would be no need for people to justify their belonging to the scene. This would lead to further destigmatizing as well as more

comfortable and honest expressions of the practitioners' desires and sexualities within BDSM.

2. 4. 1. The Top/Bottom dichotomy and the manifestations of Power

To understand the complicated relationship between masculinities within BDSM and the literature, we need to examine critically the notions of 'dominance' and 'submission' and their contested relationship with gender. Whether BDSM is a violent male-dominated space conjured up from the mind of a 'deranged' 18th-century Frenchman or a positive sexual space has been discussed in great lengths in feminist literature since the middle of the 20th century (Dworkin, 1987; Linden, 1982; Rubin, 2011; Meeker et al., 2019). As demonstrated and carefully discussed earlier in the chapter, the BDSM lifestyle was caught up in the 'sex wars' and faced criticism by certain feminist currents (Mueller, 2018). At the same time, BDSM had its support, and after many years of careful research, lifting the stigmas and the growing visibility of what was once termed 'alternative sexualities', this sexual space has earned itself a prominent place in mainstream culture. While taboo is certainly there, it is more accessible and accepted. Yet, BDSM still causes uneasiness when it comes to issues of 'female submissiveness' and 'male dominance', as well as concerns of consent and abuse. As years of research have shown (Kahn, 2018; Newmahr, 2011; Beckman, 2009), gender identities within BDSM are complex, contingent and might be presented differently across various BDSM scenes. Studies on women and their participation in the fetish and kink communities have been a dominating aspect of BDSM studies because many people still ask questions such as 'Why would women want to be dominated by men?', 'Am I a bad feminist if I want to be abused by someone in BDSM context to fulfil my sexual needs?', 'Why would men want to do such things to women to get sexual satisfaction?' (Carlström, 2017). These are of course, very reasonable questions to ask in our society which has been trying to achieve equality and breakthrough structural and systematic gender oppression. However, whether BDSM is a by-product of patriarchal societies or a side – effect of the struggles against patriarchy (Lammers and Imhof, 2016) is an important question to address. However, this is not as straightforward. As I depart from Rubin's research on S/M as a

transgressive practice, pushed aside to the margins, just like much BDSM research has been about (Weiss, 2011), I do look at the scene as anti-patriarchal in its core. Anti-patriarchal, in this sense, would be related to the destabilization of power men hold, breaking the gender binary, and rejecting heteronormative Christian – family social scripts (Hoskin, 2020). As the BDSM community started at the fringe of ‘acceptable’ society and pushed the limits of what sex, sexuality, erotica, and the gendered social roles of people are, it is argued in this thesis that the scene pushed back and subverted patriarchal roles at its inception.

At the same time, BDSM cannot be regarded as one fixed practice and arguing that BDSM is one or the other is a fruitless endeavour, as it can be both. As I learned through my fieldwork, BDSM is complex and layered and should be addressed as such. Furthermore, I would like to be careful not to fall into the discourse of ‘the Other’ if I may borrow the term from Said (1978). BDSM can become fetishized, eroticised, overly romanticized and othered by academics and mainstream society alike, as cautioned by Langridge and Parchev (2018). Thus, we academics have to be careful not to indulge in these sorts of binary, toxic discourses which do not do much for BDSM apart from going into circles about whether BDSM is bad/good, feminist/nonfeminist, essential/learned, normative/othered; instead looking at BDSM as a convoluted space, inhabited by many, different, varied and complex people who would experience BDSM in their own contexts, through their own unique ontologies and worldviews (Viveiros de Castro, 2015), with all of the ‘bad’ and the ‘good’ would give us a much better understanding and move the academic discourse ahead. With the following sections and discussions, I have aimed to capture and demonstrate the ‘messiness’ and contradictions surrounding BDSM and present a dialogue on some of the important topics surrounding gender and masculinities within the scene.

The roots of the issues with female submission and male dominance, as argued by Barker (2013) can also be traced down to the 80s sex wars when BDSM. Just like pornography and other ‘deviant practices’, BDSM became at odds with feminism since it was seen as a sexist, sadistic performance, subjecting women to stereotypical submission roles with men exercising dominance and power (Mueller, 2018). According to Gayle Rubin (2011), the biggest issue with S/M sex was that it did not fit into the accepted sexual behaviours of feminism due to its association with power, dominance and polarised ideas of mastery, slavery, pain and pleasure thus, it failed to be considered feminist enough, and it was

pushed aside as misogynistic and unacceptable. As Rubin put it (2011: 126), there is nothing 'feminist or nonfeminist' about S/M, and people are practising it from various political and sexual backgrounds. In this sense, I would argue that BDSM should be studied beyond 'positive' and 'negative', 'sexist' and non-sexist' because in itself does not embody any of these (Ritchie and Barker, 2005). Rather, just like with any other activity or cultural group, there would be people practising it that are abusive, sexists and so forth, but that does not mean the group in itself is any of these (Ritchie and Barker, 2005).

Just like with sexualisation, BDSM tends to get heavily gendered and studied in light of how it affects women and whether it enforces binaries of dominance and oppression (Banerjee et al., 2018). The words 'submissive' and 'dominant' themselves illicit gendered connotations in that submission is usually seen as a classic female trait in patriarchal societies. At the same time, dominance is regarded as classically male and, in this case, submissive women get accused of conforming to male oppression (Mueller, 2017).

However, we have to consider how these terms are used in BDSM contexts, and we should be careful in attaching meanings to them outside the BDSM scene. Research has shown that in BDSM, the binary distinction between submission and dominance is not that clear, and often the power lies within the sub, not the dom (Rivoli, 2015). In a study by Herbert and Weaver (2014), participants reported that submissives and dominants have equal power in a scene, and people can choose to either suppress or assert control depending on the role play.

Furthermore, 'switching' is a quite common practice where in different role play scenarios, people switch between being a top and being a bottom (Martinez, 2018). This tells us how important context is when it comes to BDSM and that it is very difficult to talk about set binaries. Another interesting concept that tends to get overlooked is 'topping from the bottom' (Zussman and Pierce, 1998). This means that even though someone identifies as a bottom and acts submissively, they are actually the one who controls the play, and the top only exists to serve the bottom's wishes (Zussman and Pierce, 1998). Furthermore, submissives are not necessarily masochists; there can be sadistic subs who, through their desires, can enact 'pain' and 'torment' on their masochistic doms; in this case, the dominants also perform altruism in making sure their subs' desires are met (Zussman and Pierce, 1998).

This is not surprising, considering the writings of the two people who are believed to be the original inspirations for BDSM. When one reads the classic novel by Sacher – Masoch, ‘Venus in Furs’ (2012[1870]), the male protagonist, who has become the symbol of masochism and submissiveness, can be read as the one who holds the actual power. When his Venus inflicts the ‘tortures’ he so desired and made her do, he is happy and fulfilled because he was the one who created them, however, once Wanda starts dominating him in her own way, Severin is unhappy, miserable and unfulfilled, so they have to renegotiate the relationship. At the end of the book (2012[1870]: 95), he even manages to ‘switch’ suddenly to a dominant to keep Wanda his. Similarly, in the writings of Marquis de Sade and in his actual life, the roles of the sadist/masochist and master/slave are very nuanced and complicated; despite the popular opinion that Sade created the symbol of the sadistic dom, he was, in fact, a rather passive masochist (Hekma, 2006). Reading carefully, his biography reveals that the Marquis’ utmost desire was to be humiliated, sodomised and violated (Donald, 1992). Only when his masochistic desires were denied would he transform into the well-known cruel sadist (Donald, 1992). Based on historical facts and biographies, it seems as if de Sade was performing rather unorthodox and transgressive masculinity for his time in that he did not so much care about his gender but only about his desires and preached that no sex acts or behaviours should be foreign to men (or women) (Hekma, 2006). It can be argued that Sade put sex, desire, submission and dominance beyond gender, which can also be attributed to the general nature of BDSM.

The nuanced relationship between a top and a bottom can be attributed to the complicated manifestations of power within BDSM. Foucault described power relations in S/M as ‘the fact that we are in a strategic situation toward each other. So we are not trapped [...] It means that we always have possibilities, there are always possibilities of changing the situation [...] There is no point where you are free from all power relations. But you can always change it’ (1997: 167). He continues by arguing that within S/M, power relations are very different from social power relations since the latter is characterised by stabilisation due to institutions who aim to keep power very static and stop the opposition, while with S/M ‘it is always fluid [...] there are roles, but everybody knows very well that those roles can be reversed’ (1997: 169). The loose and contingent nature of power within BDSM can account for the fluid nature of the participants’ identities and the complex relations

between doms and subs – the lines between the two become blurred because, as Foucault argued (1997), the power relations are not fixed and are not without resistance; because of the resistance, power relations must change, otherwise it is just matter of obedience.

Drawing upon Foucault, power in S/M settings has also been understood in terms of ‘exchange’ and it has been argued that power exchange is one of the focal points of BDSM (Priori, 2013). Power exchange occurs when a person gives away all their control and trust to gain pleasure from the master/dominant (Priori, 2013). In this sense, we have equals and not just one person exercising asymmetrical power over an obedient person, even though it might initially seem so (Priori, 2013).

Langdrige and Butt (2006) have observed a tendency where some BDSM and S&M communities to use the term erotic power exchange (EPE) as a substitute for BDSM, D/s, sadomasochism and so forth since they believe these terms are too limited, problematic and do not correspond to what BDSM should be about. Using the Erotic Power Exchange discourse to describe BDSM is to move away from the problematic view on pain and become more socially acceptable (Langdrige and Butt, 2005). However, I would like to caution the differentiation of power and pain and argue, based on Langdrige and Butt (2005), that BDSM practices, just like most postmodern sexualities, are extremely varied, layered and complex to assume that only one aspect is the dominating one. This leads us back to the ‘normalisation’ of BDSM, where the concept of pain is downplayed in favour of erotic power exchange (EPE), which aims to distinguish BDSM from the medico–pathological association faced in society (Langdrige and Butt, 2005). Nevertheless, in a poststructural sense, power is an important concept in BDSM that helps us understand the relationship between the participants during role plays and accounts for the fluidity of masculinities.

2. 4. 2. Gender roles in BDSM: The Performance of Masculinity

BDSM can be studied through the notions of ‘performance’ and ‘ritual’ (Klement et al., 2016; Carlström, 2020; 2018; Turley, 2022; Mueller, 2018; Fennell, 2018). Ritual, Turner argues, ‘is a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects,

performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preter- natural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests' (1973: 1100). Carlström (2018) posits that BDSM exhibits ritualistic aspects in that participating in it serves as a space where people get a sense of belonging, security and meaning. Sagarin et al (2015) find that BDSM practitioners report an altered state of conscience, which is in line with extreme rituals. 'Sacred kink' is also a term used to describe BDSM by some pagan communities to account for the scene's spiritual activities and connect to the gods (Mueller, 2018). Airaksinen (2018) posits that the dichotomy of pleasure/pain in BDSM is a widespread religious aspect that gives a sense of satisfaction and one's own self-reward.

Looking at BDSM as a ritualistic performance space can prove helpful in understanding gender roles and, more specifically, how masculinities are performed and manifested both as symbols and as part of the participants' identities. In Newmahr's research in the Caeden S/M community (2011), she observed the participants' tendency to defy gender and sexed bodies by either having overweight bodies, thus challenging social stereotypes on what men and women should look like or having 'underdeveloped' bodies so they can escape sexualised standards for masculinity and femininity. Newmahr observes something she calls 'incidental androgyny' (2011: 29), which happens when people are not actively seeking to perform gender-bending or sex role ambivalence, but rather it happens because of absence of objective to attune to mainstream gender identities. As Newmahr writes:

Neither butch nor femme, these (usually heterosexual) women and men do not follow or overturn the rules of gender representation. They simply live outside of them. Understood in the context of West and Zimmerman' work, in which 'doing' masculinity and femininity are active quotidian processes (1987), this 'incidental androgyny is less an actively constituted gender than what we are left with when we do not 'do' gender quite so fully or quite so well. (2011: 29)

According to Newmahr, it was during plays that gender could be 'performed, mimicked, extended, challenged and subverted' (2011: 106). However, everything revolved around the related but also distinct identities of 'bottoming' and 'topping'. During a play, a man who is whipping a woman is symbolically performing masculinity that is not socially acceptable, and a woman who is complying with it is performing a symbolic, also unacceptable feminine role; we have hyperbolic masculinity and hyperbolic femininity that are tied respectively to

topping and bottoming (Newmahr, 2011). What is important to note in Newmahr's writings is the sense of 'disembodied' masculinities and femininities that could be taken and enacted by anyone, regardless of the gender they identify with, outside of the community. In this sense, masculinities and femininities are not trapped in the categories of 'men' and 'women' but are tied with the top and bottom categories. BDSM is not only complex but 'paradoxical [...] it is subversive and conformist, liberating and constraining, performative and authentic, and misogynistic and feminist.' (2011: 168).

Weiss (2011) also similarly argues that the negative power of some stereotypes could be taken and subverted by engaging in highly hyperbolic role plays. The notion of hyperbolic masculinity has been observed and studied in some gay leather communities and les – bi – trans queer BDSM communities. During role plays, people would adopt a highly eroticised hyper – masculine identities (Bauer, 2017). In Mosher and Sirkin (1984) hyper – masculinity was defined in terms of aggression, sexual callousness, violence, insensitivity and the domination of men over women and other men and the term was traced down to the 'macho' cult from Latin America. Since then the term has generally preserved its association with [sexually] aggressive masculinity (Vokey et al, 2013).

According to Bauer (2017), the adoption of certain hyper-masculine features could be read as a defence mechanism against the oppression these people could face outside of BDSM, and they could flirt with the idea of hyper-masculinity without becoming too complacent with it. Similarly, in the findings of Childs (2016), within a gay leather BDSM community, we have an eroticisation and embracing of hyper-masculine identities, which he reports as both 'fixed and fluid' (2016: 1325). All members of the scene (not just the 'tops') were adopting aspects of hyper-masculinities that appealed most to them, creating various versions of hyper-masculinities: 'The jouissance of the 'new guard' [new practitioners] is at odds with the traditional perspective of the old guard. Swirling together, the old and the new, dominants and submissives, Tops and Bottoms, Daddies and Boys, combine to fashion a unique type of hyper-masculinity [...] a merging of the old guard and the new, a grounded subjectivity resulting in an embodied, place-contingent masculinity and by extension, hyper-masculinity. This blending allows for a more nuanced understanding of masculinity' (Childs, 2016: 1325, 1326). Hyper – masculine representations were transcending the top/bottom binary in that everyone could adopt them thus leading to a subversion of the hyper

masculine stereotype. Furthermore, Childs' participants reported that even though BDSM reproduces traditional gender roles, it also creates new gender categories and ways of manifesting their masculine identities, which again shows BDSM's contingency (2016).

Similarly to Childs, in MCoun's research on leather and S/M gay clubs (2006), they found out the masculinities manifested by the tops and the bottoms were not entirely different even though the tops would perform a very hyperbolic masculinities and the bottoms more vulnerable ones. The participants reported that 'It is all about masculine roles, even the submissive roles are masculine. . . . Like being a Boy or Slave or whatever you want to call it . . . it is masculine' (2006: 113). In this sense, masculinities are being manifested in different forms that are equal to each other, allowing the participants to experiment with these forms without feeling any less of a man, which is something they have been struggling with outside of the leather clubs (2006).

Despite some studies capturing masculinities in BDSM, the literature is somewhat limited in exploring men and their sexual identities in the S/M scene. Studying female submissiveness and dominance (e.g. Richie and Barker, 2005; Rivoli, 2015) has been deemed necessary in order to show that BDSM is not sexist and does not reproduce gender inequality. On the other hand, more research is needed to theorise men's dominant, submissive and switch performances and show the varied ways they make sense of their sexualities and pleasure. In the final section, I will discuss how masculinity studies can benefit from the study of BDSM within digital platforms.

2. 5. Sex, digitality and rock'n'roll: Contemporary experiences of BDSM through technology and online platforms

As the coronavirus pandemic emerged, many sex clubs and events hosting BDSM and fetish nights were forced to close doors for a long time, and it became apparent that my methodology needed to change. This will be discussed in greater depth in the following chapter, **Methodology**. Based on this, I had to find new data collection methods and expand the research scope online. This was not very difficult since, as Kratzer (2020) argues, the BDSM internet presence is vast and continues to grow and improve, with sites and blogs offering dating advice, lifestyle tips, meeting people, and open forums allowing discussions,

advertising, and mentoring. As Kratzer (ibid: 201) writes: 'Educating new members was apparent in subtle ways on the Fetlife webpages. While education in the form of classes is important for many kinky people, especially those who are members of a dungeon community, they were mentioned rarely in the About & Rules or the Stickies'.

According to Rubinsky (2018), BDSM practitioners can find internet-based relationships requiring less effort to maintain and negotiate. Her participants reported that it was easier to discuss their kinks with people they had not met face to face, and they reported large doses of disinhibitions regarding their BDSM desires, compared to real-life meetups.

According to Szulc and Dhoest (2013), internet spaces have been and continue to be quite crucial in coming out and identifying with more niche queer and BDSM identities. As I looked at this new way of exploring BDSM and the associated masculinities, it became evident that there are significant gaps in the literature, specifically when it comes to BDSM and gender identities in online spaces.

When it comes specifically to masculinities and the digital, there is a significant gap in the literature which has been noted, and there has been an urgency to study masculinities through the digital in greater depth (Gough, 2018; Light, 2013). Moreover, while, especially recently, there have been studies mapping out masculinities on social networking sites such as Instagram, Youtube and Reddit (e.g. Amaral et al., 2020; Amaral et al., 2021; Choi, 2020), not much has been written on masculinities and BDSM on the major BDSM networking sites. Similarly, there is research covering BDSM and the online (e. g. Rosewarne, 2016; Kratzer, 2020; Fiesler et al., 2020), yet the specific relationship between BDSM and masculinities remains relatively uncharted. Here I would like to bring some attention to how vital the online sphere is, especially for more marginalised sexual performances, including kink and fetish, and how practitioners discover desires, friendships and relationships through the digital. This would help situate the choice of online fieldwork better and show how important the online sphere is for BDSM practitioners, who might find it easier to gain acceptance, friendships and find partners. Furthermore, through online BDSM engagement, people can participate in more extensive discussions and have a level of anonymity and safety.

While Fetlife remains the largest platform for BDSM, years ago, Tumblr was extremely popular among young millennials, in a UK and US contexts, offering free reblogging of porn

gifs and highly sexualised content, with fetish and queer porn being quite popular (Mondin, 2017). The 'golden years' of Tumblr have been hailed as feminist, kink and queer-friendly, allowing young people to engage safely, explore their sexuality, and realise they are not alone in the world (Mondin, 2017). However, Tumblr's safe queer and kink haven ended in December 2018, with the ban of pornography and highly eroticised content, purging queer representation of its site (Engelberg and Needham, 2019). The announcement stated that this is a 'positive thing' and is made out of love for the community (Byron, 2019). The message has been clear – even in 2018, anything other than socially acceptable heteronormative, non-sexual and non – 'deviant' behaviour was no longer welcome, thus enforcing the margins of the 'outer' and 'inner' circles (Rubin, 2011).

Immediately after the ban, Tumblr's fame exponentially decreased, and many users left the site. Currently, as I barely browse my Tumblr page in 2021, the site is a sad reminder of what it was – a collection of cultural artefacts that marked mine and many other people's mid-teenage years and early twenties in the years between 2010-2017. The ban on explicit content on Tumblr served as a sad reminder of how easy it can be to eliminate non – heteronormative representation and queer spaces. In fact, Tumblr was the only place that was not marked by a heteronormative binary division between sex and gender in that:

'[o]ne of the qualities specific to porn on Tumblr was how a user's interface allowed for counterhegemonic taxonomies that unfurled in curated, composite feeds. Pornhub and many other tubesites operate strict divisions between 'gay' and 'straight' porn, consequently rendering a user's access contingent upon a binaristic choice' (Engelberg and Needham, 2019: 351)

Byron also argues (2019) that Tumblr became a space to express queer pride or pride in being different, giving people from marginalised sexual communities visibility and shared space. Tiidenberg (2019: 364 – 365) also writes that: 'my participants bemoaned the loss of 'life-changing relationships' with people, who had helped them realize that there is not just one 'correct' way of doing kink; that their 'kink is valid and good' just the way they want to do it.' Here the issue is not necessarily that there are no other places where people could share their kinks and find support; the issue mainly lies in the fact that most of those online spaces are pushed to the margins and are not easy to find. Tumblr's NSFW (Not Safe For Work) blogs kept living on BDSMIr, which is the same as Tumblr but only for kink and BDSM.

However, this is not an easy website to find. Tumblr was perfect in that it occupied a wonderfully liminal space, if I may borrow the term from Turner (1973), in that it was visible, easy to access, yet offered the NSFW content of the 'seedy', hidden sex websites. It lay perfectly between the 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable lines,' blurring the margins.

Moreover, I believe this was one of the reasons why it was so popular with everyone at the time. BDSMlr, on the other hand, does not even come up on Google's first search pages, and it did not pick up the past glory of Tumblr. Many people turned to Reddit, Twitter and OnlyFans, with Reddit currently offering large, easily accessible BDSM pages, yet none of it is what people had on Tumblr. On many message boards and forums, people also would complain about Fetlife, calling it a lazy website that does not do much to improve itself, as it is the only one of its kind. There is barely any traffic nowadays, compared to its inception ten years ago.

The reason why I am paying significant attention in this section on the debates surrounding Tumblr's porn ban is that it is important to situate this in a larger social and historical context, with attention to the Foucauldian critique offered by the NSFW Tumblr years, as argued by Tiidenberg and Whelan's (2019). First, Tumblr's policy did not have any NSFW rules, as long as people marked their posts with the disclaimer not to recommend those images to people in safe mode; apart from this, there were no existing regulations. The NSFW of Tumblr also allowed critique of what was seen as acceptable, aesthetically pleasing, and proper, thus offering interpretational and interactional practices between users (Tiidenberg and Whelan, 2019). Tumblr allowed a very nuanced and fluid approach to sharing, reblogging and self-representation since 'reblogging renders the shared content a marker of the community, facilitating liquidity around authoriality and rendering Tumblr a collaboratively produced representational space' (Tiidenberg and Whelan, 2019: 91). Tumblr fit in the definition of critique as offered by Foucault, as he argued that critique requires an active doing, resistance, and challenge; critique would serve to defy authority and would lead to voluntary insubordination (Foucault, 1996). As such, Tumblr offers critique in Foucauldian terms since it challenged larger societal and moral norms, thus offering resistance and reforming the status quo concerning gender and sexualities. Of course, this all ended, mainly due to overarching capitalist and government policies which did exert complete control over the website. On the one hand, Verizon (Tumblr owners) wanted to

make the platform more profitable by increasing ad revenue and on the other, Verizon wanted to implement the SESTA/FOSTA laws introduced by Congress to combat sex trafficking online (Bornstein, 2020).

Another essential aspect of Tumblr was the interactivity on the platform, which was especially useful for people interested in BDSM, as there were many discourses on what is and what does not constitute as BDSM. The erotic and sexual playfulness was mixed with easily accessible information on the differences between abuse and kink. Without a proper platform where people could share experiences and information, there are not many places where young, impressionable BDSMers could learn how to practice safely. This can only lead to much more predatory incidents, with possible abusers preying on the new participants.

For the purposes of the study, I will be paying attention to Tumblr and what is left in terms of BDSM representation and the parallel site BDSMlr. This will be discussed in greater depth in the following **Methodology Chapter**. As such, I believe that my study would prove beneficial in the studies of digital gender representations and sexual platforms and would fill in a gap in the literature when it comes to studying specifically masculinities through the online sphere.

2. 6. Studying Masculinities through BDSM: Concluding Thoughts

It is clear that within BDSM there are different manifestations of masculinities which gives men and women the freedom to perform and enact various masculine forms. In the previous sections, I argued that male heterosexuality had been studied in light of its 'oppressive nature', Connell's hegemony and danger towards women. BDSM gives the possibility to study male sexuality outside of danger and oppression, considering BDSM's ability to turn around and subvert gender stereotypes. As already discussed within BDSM, masculinities and femininities are seen as symbolic performances that can be performed by anyone (Newmahr, 2011), and the pain-pleasure, slave – master, top – bottom dichotomies are not so much about gender roles as about the transcended experience, since everyone can choose their role (Beckmann, 2009). In this sense, men do not have to upkeep with the assumed masculine/power dichotomy but instead would be guided by their desires and

erotic experiences. The premise of male submissiveness challenges the masculinity/power dichotomy and shows that male sexual desire is not necessarily tied to dominating and abusing (Khan, 2018).

Considering this variety of practices and identities, I am arguing that the BDSM scene would prove helpful in testing whether any hegemonic instances can be outlined. If such are identified, we can see whether they are structured patterns or whether we should talk about repeated instances and moments, which are fluid and dependent on the place, context and people involved. Considering that generally, there are different ethics and rules in the different BDSM communities (Parchev and Langdrige, 2018), we might hypothesise that certain hegemonic (influential) practices are visible. However, we should be careful not to treat them as fixed structural patterns across BDSM in general. For example, the issue of obtaining explicit consent between participants can be seen as hegemonic (influential) and vastly invoked morale across BDSM communities in general (Barker 2013). However, Fanghanel (2019) warns us that it is not as simple as that. While the issue of consent remains relatively central within BDSM communities, it is not a fixed pattern but instead depends on the participants, the scene being enacted, and the context, among other things (Fanghanel, 2019). Sometimes consent is taken for granted; sometimes, it is explicitly obtained and, on occasions, violated (Beres and McDonald, 2016), which tells us that even something seen as universal and hegemonic in that it is said to be influential and looked up to in a way, is very contingent.

Regarding gender and masculinities, particularly within BDSM, things get complicated since research has shown that gender identity and sexual orientation are generally unimportant (Better and Simula, 2015; Califia, 2000). Evidence has shown that it is the BDSM orientation, that is, whether someone is a sub, dom, masochist, sadist and so forth, that is important, not the gender they identify with (Better and Simula, 2015), so in this case, it might be challenging to identify any hegemonic instances when it comes to gender identities. In Martinez's (2018) BDSM sample, most men tended to identify with more 'classical' masculinity forms and perform predominantly dominant roles, while other men changed their dominant identities over time and started performing submissive roles (and vice versa). In this case, this might be interpreted as evidence that in specific BDSM

communities, the men tend to identify with more stereotypically masculine roles, henceforth creating certain hegemonic and repeated instances.

Furthermore, online and digital platforms can help us research varied masculine gender expressions tied to BDSM roles, thus bringing forward more feminist and post-structuralist views on how men navigate the contemporary sexual and gender landscape.

Considering the limitations in the literature discussed in this chapter, I believe my study would add valuable insight into the studies on sexualisation, masculinities and BDSM. With my fieldwork, which will be discussed in my next chapter, I aim to present in-depth research into the nature of BDSM and incorporate the studies of masculinities with feminism and post-structuralism.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3. 1 Introducing the Chapter

In this chapter I will be discussing my methodological positions and explain why I have chosen the research traditions am situating myself into. The first part will be giving a short overview on the ontological and epistemological traditions in social scientific research, followed by a brief outline on the history of ideas in anthropology. I believe this discussion is necessary to make sense of my own ontological and epistemological positions, which will be logically followed by the choice of methods. Consequently, I will explain the reasoning behind my choice of qualitative methods and elaborate on the two methods I have selected for this research – participant observation fieldwork, accompanied by online textual data collection. Considering the nature of my research and the field I will be exploring, full discussion on the ethical implications will be presented with hopes to further the conversation on fieldworks in sexual spaces, which is rather absent in anthropological methodological discussions.

3. 2. Situating and Obtaining Knowledge: Ontological and Epistemological traditions in Cultural Anthropology

The premise of my research is on how masculinities are performed and manifested in modern day sexual platforms, with focus being on BDSM. The performativity of gender has been largely studied through feminist, queer and post structural theories which showed the errors in the essentialist views of gender and sex and aimed to implement more complex and flexible way of viewing gender, power and sex (Barnard, 2000). However, as it was considered in the previous chapter, masculinity studies have tended to define masculine identities and power through more structural lenses, and in response I am utilising post structural feminist theories. Therefore, my choice of methodology and philosophical

position have been carefully selected to reflect the masculinity fluidness I am suggesting in the thesis.

It has been argued (Taylor, Bogdan, DeValt, 2016) that the choice of methodology depends on the researcher's position within their particular scientific traditions. Researchers should be aware of their ontological positions that will inevitably lead to the epistemological stance from which logically the methodology will follow (Grix, 2010). The words for 'ontology' and 'epistemology' are of recent origin, however, their philosophical concepts can be traced back to Ancient Greek times (Graeber, 2015). Ontology can be defined as a discourse on the nature of being, while epistemology is a discourse relating to the possibility of knowledge and knowing the world (Graeber, 2015). Natural sciences are rooted in an objectivistic ontology, which is foundationalist; that is, the world is 'out there' for us to observe and knowledge exists separately from us (Raadschelders, 2011). The opposite of objectivist ontology is the constructivist ontology, which is anti – foundationalist, where knowledge is socially constructed, local, and context dependent (Scotland, 2012). The epistemology in this thesis is based on interpretivism which rejects the positivist epistemology and the natural sciences' position on knowledge – for the interpretavists knowledge is subjective and does not exist outside our perceptions thus making it socially constructed and highly dependent on how people define their own meanings (Potrac et al, 2014). The researcher is not the objective, detached scientist but an active participant in the construction of knowledge (Laverde, 2003). This has relevance for the cultural anthropological approach that is adopted by the thesis.

Since its beginning, cultural anthropology had an uneasy relationship with both the natural sciences and the humanities (Eriksen, 2011). The issues arose from the differing ontological and epistemological perspectives. There was debate within anthropology whether anthropologists should treat the world and human cultures as independent of the researcher 'objects' for them to study and subject to universal laws or turn towards cultural relativism and treat knowledge as socially constructed and human behaviour as uniquely different (Eriksen, 2015). The widespread ontological questions in anthropology are 'Do humans and different cultures share the same characteristics? Do humans think in the same way?' which then is followed by the epistemological question of 'Is it possible to understand and know how other people think and know their worlds'? (Moore, 2014: 1). The answer to

these questions depended on biology, science, psychology, cognition and theories from diverse disciplines (Moore, 2014).

In its earlier years cultural anthropology had the aspirations to be part of the natural sciences and aimed to study human cultures and behaviours largely through evolution and biology (Moor, 1994). Anthropology was inspired by Durkheim and his ideas of sociology being like the natural sciences, thus undertaking a very scientific positions of objectivist ontology and positivist epistemology (Chowdhury, 2014).

The postmodernist critique towards the positivist heritage from the Enlightenment is quite clear within poststructuralist and feminist critiques. Poststructuralism and some feminist currents alike rejected the idea of true nature, arguing that, human beings are historical beings who change and fluctuate with time, thus, what we know or thought we know was challenged by anthropologists (Hughes and Sharrock, 2007) Reflexivity (which will be discussed in depth later in the chapter under section [3.3.5 Issues with reflexivity](#)) became highly praised by feminist anthropologists since it started dissolving the boundaries between the ethnographer and his/her participants (Berger, 2015). Feminism critiqued the Western centred and phallogocentric ways of performing ethnography and modernist views on strict gender roles and the categories of 'Men' and 'Women', these categories are not universal across cultures (Homer, 2004; Oyěwùmí, 1997). Both post-structuralism and feminism rejected the modernist concepts of what can be known, their relationship between the known and knower and the search for some fundamental truths (Finkelde, 2013).

The implication of the strong anti – essentialist and interpretive epistemologies was important to how men/women and masculinities/femininities were seen and studied; for example, the term 'woman' was rejected as an essential sameness that unifies all women but rather the word receives new meaning every time a context is given which means there can be infinite ways of perceiving a 'woman' (Gibson – Graham, 2000).

It has been argued (Henare et al, 2007) that anthropology has not paid enough attention on its ontology but only on the epistemology since anthropology was seen as an epistemology in itself: '[t]he assumption, then, has always been that anthropology is an episteme – indeed, the episteme of others' epistemes, which we call cultures' (2007:10). For example,

Geertz claimed that it is not important what the ontological position is since we are all things of this world' but we construct different meanings, so the epistemological stance is vital if we want to understand those meanings properly (Geertz, 1973: 10). Viveiros de Castro (1998; 2012; 2015) noted that the roots of the ontological issues in anthropology lie with the Cartesian Dualism, which prevails most of the scientific research since Modernism. According to him anthropology was positioning itself mostly epistemologically with the ontology being overly simplified. Hence why, anthropology became an *episteme* in itself – a knowledge aiming to understand other people's knowledge; that is other people's way of knowing their own worldviews (2007: 9). However, for both Viveiros de Castro (1998a; 1998b; 2015) and Henare et al (2007) this type of constructivist ontology only creates the illusion that other people's worldviews are represented justly and without ethnocentric bias since this ontology is a Western creation inherited from Modernism.

As it is vivid from the above discussion, central issue within anthropology was and still is how to make sure human cultures and behaviours are being adequately studied and represented, without scientific and ethnocentric bias and without favouring one worldview over another. After careful consideration of the various traditions of producing knowledge, as well as anthropology's troubled past, I believe that in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding on how people construct their own identities in the context of BDSM, I should design my methodology based on constructivist, anti – foundationalist and relative ontology with interpretivist epistemology. Thus, the study is situated firmly in post structuralism and feminism.

3. 3. Designing Qualitative Research: Benefits and Challenges

The choice of my methods stems directly from my theoretical and philosophical belonging. Considering that I do identify with interpretive traditions, the choice of qualitative methods fits best the nature of my research since I am interested in people's lived experiences and way of constructing their own worlds. Here researchers can generally follow a more flexible research designs and study people, situations and settings not as independent 'variables' but as 'wholes' with participants being placed in their contexts thus viewed in relation to their history and experiences (Taylor, Bogdan and DeValt, 2016). It is argued that qualitative

methods require prolonged contact with people in their 'life settings' so the researcher can get a holistic overview of the context and capture data from the inside, which makes the qualitative research highly utilised among social scientists who position themselves in anti-positivist paradigms (Punch, 2014). Since people come from diverging backgrounds and bring their own lived experience in the research, the researcher needs to also position themselves and recognise what they bring into the research and how their background might affect the study they are conducting (Milner, 2007). Being aware of one's own presence can help negotiating any obstacles and issues that may arise due to the researcher's diverging (or similar) experience of the world (Milner, 2007). The context where my research took place was highly gendered and sexualised, with the focus being predominantly on men which raised questions about my position as a woman conducting research on masculinities (Allain, 2014). Before going in the field, I hypothesized whatever access and data I obtained would depend on my position as a female researcher. In fact, during the fieldwork period, I became highly aware of my positionality which often helped me with the data collection. In the following sections I will discuss how my gender, age and even ethnicity were coming into play during the data collection period.

For the purposes of my research the two selected qualitative methods are participant observation, and online data collection through websites such as fetlife.com, fetish.com, bdsmblr.com/tumblr.com, reddit.com where I collected comments and forum discussions that have already happened. I did not participate in those discussions. This is why I used textual critical discourse analysis for this. Unfortunately, due to Covid 19 and issues of access, I have not performed any interviews. I had unstructured conversations on the field, but I have not been interviewing people. The data analysed in this thesis comes from observations during my in-person fieldwork and the aforementioned unstructured conversations and critical discourse analysis of forums, comments and forum discussions. The online data collection had to happen due to both anxieties around my safety physically attending clubs and the Covid – 19 pandemic, which became prevalent just in the middle of my fieldwork. These methods have wide range of use especially in sociological and anthropological research. Participant observation can give us general understanding of the context and put situations into perspective, which then can lead us to the 'thick description' as understood by Geertz (Ponterotto, 2006). Considering the length and restrictions of a

PhD, a long-term participant observation fieldwork would not be possible, which can be a disadvantage, however, using additional methods in support of it can aid me to achieve a rich data in a shorter period of time (Aagaard and Matthiesen, 2015).

3. 3. 1. Participant Observation in Anthropology

Before the ‘father of anthropology’ Malinowski introduced the practice of participant observation, often anthropology was defined by ‘armchair’ anthropologists who were making assumptions about other people’s cultures without necessarily visiting them (Kawulich, 2005). Malinowski published *The Argonauts of the Pacific West* in 1922 after spending years on the Trobriand Islands (Barnard, 2000). Even though some fieldworks had been undertaken prior to Malinowski’s research he was the first anthropologist to introduce the concept of ‘participant observation’ which was characterised by actively participating in the lives of the people in the studied culture (Eriksen, 2011). Malinowski also introduced the idea of the well – mannered, perfectly detached anthropologist; the chameleon who is a walking miracle of tact, empathy, understanding and patience (Geertz, 1983). This tradition became a canon in anthropological research, and no one dared talk about anthropologists as gendered, sexual beings (Kulick and Willson, 1995).

The term participant observation has been regarded as an oxymoron in the anthropological tradition; we have to participate and get involved in order to understand other people’s world views but then we have to step back, observe and leave the field to report back what we found out (Merriam, 1998). We are cautioned that too much involvement is problematic because of the bias it can create but at the same time we are cautioned to make sure we are involved enough so we can report back accurately (Watson and Till, 2010). The dual nature of the anthropologist in the field has been addressed and as Evans – Pritchard remarked, ‘[o]ne enters into another culture and withdraws from it at the same time.’ (1973: 3). This is attributed to the underlying notions of what is understood as ideal scientific research (Bell, 2019). This ideal research is achieved through a pristine relationship between researcher and participant where the former can easily navigate the field space and remain as detached from it as possible while also gaining large amounts of data (Bell, 2019). The decades of practice have shown that such an ideal relationship does not exist and the role of

the researcher in the field is very nuanced and complex and they an active role in the events that are being observed (Frank, 2015).

Moreover, the anthropological participant observation is no longer about studying 'the exotic other' but instead many anthropologists turn to study their own cultures (Todd, 2016). Turley (2011) who has done extensive research on BDSM is also an active participant in the BDSM community; Moser (1998) garnered access and rich data in male leather clubs after being involved in the community for many years. Todd (2016) warns us against the idealised vision of the outsider anthropologist conducting a 'detached' and unbiased participant observation because it takes away the legitimacy and agency of researchers who study their own cultures; especially problematic, she argues, is the use of the phrase 'going native' which not only carries colonialist connotations but implies that indigenous anthropologists cannot study their own societies. The method of participant observation has been placed under scrutiny and heavily challenged by the poststructuralist thinkers, who appealed on changes in the way ethnographic research was conducted (Ingold, 2014). Shah (2017: 53) also considers our reliance on technology and argues that: 'In most of our field sites, there is the easy possibility of a constant emotional intrusion via technology—mobile phones, emails—from our shoreline that can be limiting to our learning, to the production of democratic pedagogy. This intrusion need not of course be prohibitive but it means that we must work ever harder at alienating ourselves from our worlds to dive into those of others'.

The biggest obstacle to overcome as researchers is how to make sure we are involved enough to produce fair and true account of the cultures we are studying (Shah, 2017). Participant observation research becomes a challenging method where the researcher occupies an ambiguous position – the line between too much involvement and too little involvement becomes smaller and either way we are faced with complications (Kawulich, 2005). My position was one of ambivalence. On one hand, I was in the role of the outsider anthropologist; the researcher as the other who enters a space that is very different from their everyday lives. On the other hand, the BDSM culture has started to 'dominate' many aspects of the popular culture, from music and adverts through BDSM inspired fetish nights at universities and to everyday intimate relations. In this case to say I have never had access points to BDSM culture on a mainstream level would simply not be true. Regardless, I

assumed the role of an outsider because I do not believe I was seen as part of the BDSM scene by my participants nor do I perceive myself as a BDSMer in any way. I accepted my outsider status as a potential obstacle that might prevent me from deep access within the scene. It has been argued (Turley, 2011) that outside researchers into BDSM are likely to experience more difficulties with obtaining data than those who have had prolonged contact with the scene.

Unfortunately, I did come across access issues. At first, I had a gatekeeper; a person very popular in the BDSM scene who also knew people organising events on national and local level. Having such a gatekeeper was perfect. Too perfect even and as it happens with many anthropologists, our friendship fell through and he cut off any contacts with me, leaving me on my own a month before the official start of the fieldwork. I realised very quickly how dependent I was on him and had not thought of alternatives as I could not believe he would abandon me. Let this be a cautionary tale – when conducting participant observation, the anthropologist should always have alternatives as gatekeepers are not always reliable (see Pollard, 2009). I had to find an alternative fast – it was difficult but not impossible. I started getting information on events through websites such as fetlife.com and fetish.com where I would contact organisers for a place. One particular event in a famous swingers club in the Midlands hosted a very popular event in October. Despite being targeted towards new people, I was denied access, with the organiser explaining that this event has become restricted only to people known in the BDSM scene and people that the organiser has met personally. Two weeks later, I wanted to book a place for another party night at a different club. Much to my dismay, I was given the exact same answer – no place if you cannot be vouched for. This time the organiser was nice enough to point me to events that did not require strict access. Even then, I still had issues as an outsider. When I finally secured a place at a party, two days prior the event I was contacted by the wife of the organiser, explaining to me he had sadly passed away. She informed me that the event will be proceeding as usual, however, it was going to take the form of a tribute to him. Only people close to the organiser were allowed at the event, therefore, I was not permitted in there anymore.

Despite thinking that access to certain events might be quite easy, reality was clearly different. As I quickly found out BDSM events are generally organised in club venues by

different organisers which means that each organiser can put their own rules and restrictions (see Chapter 5 Analysis for discussion). Often events would be restricted to people the organisers know personally or established kinksters and their friends. I was also told by an organiser that in order to get access as a 'newbie' I would need to first build friendships in munches and social gatherings so then I can get into parties. This was interesting, since it was telling me about a hierarchy of sort or system where you need to build some connections before you can move up. Who you know was definitely important.

When I secured a place at an event finally, I had to make sure measurements are taken, in order to make my participants feel more comfortable with my presence. This included appropriate clothing, not taking any notes during observation and following the general code of conduct during BDSM events. How a researcher dresses and carries themselves throughout the fieldwork timeline is important, since clothing can either help the researcher to blend in better and show respect or to stand out and maintain the position of 'the Other' (Frank, 2015). Moreover, clothes might signal 'availability' or serve as protection in more sexual environments (Hammers, 2009). BDSM events are known for their dress codes (Martin, 2011) so it was necessary to take this into consideration. The clothes I had to wear for most of the events were more of a standard club wear since it was the minimum requirement to attend events. All clubs had their own dress codes, which has to do with maintaining the 'fantasy' but also neoliberal notions of respectability (discussed in [chapter 4](#)) which were pretty much the same across all places – minimum 'dress to impress' (usually this would be suits, black dresses and corsets), with full fetish gear being encouraged. Everyday wear was absolutely forbidden and if someone turned up in jeans, t-shirts and casual wear, they would be denied access. In the rules provided by one of the organisers of a BDSM event I attended was that these spaces have to maintain the fantasy. Explicit rules against unhygienic and badly dressed people were enforced, thus creating a very niche and exclusionary environment.

Another issues I had to consider was the position of the researcher in sexual fields of research. I have started this section with Malinowski, not only because he created the tradition of participant observation, which is the main method I will be using in my research, but because of irony. The 'Father of us All' who wrote extensively on the sexual lives of the Trobriand Islanders became more famous not due to his anthropological analysis on sex but

due to his own lustful fantasies (Kulick and Willson, 1995). As Geertz wrote ‘... Malinowski was not, to put it delicately, an unmitigated nice guy’ (2000: 56). After the posthumous publication of his private diary, it was brought to light that he was ‘deeply troubled’ by sex thoughts and lustful desires towards the local women (Lansdown, 2014). The publication of the *Diary* was subject to lots of controversy and anthropologists did not want to discuss it or approach the topic of the fieldworker engaging in sex on the field or even thinking about it (Lansdown, 2014). Undergraduate anthropologists are cautioned about ethics on the field especially when the topic of research is to do with sex, however, the topic of sex is never properly discussed unless it is to do with other people’s sexual lives and behaviours. As it has been argued (Goode, 2002) discussions on participant observation lack serious information on how an anthropologist should act, what they should expect and who they should be in a sexual field of research. The general reluctance to discuss sex and relationships on the field is not very clear, considering anthropologists do not shy away from discussing other people’s sexual behaviours (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2010) which is exactly what I am doing in this thesis.

There are, however, researchers who have discussed in depth their involvement with people on the field, their sexual relations and whether these have jeopardised or enhanced their data (Kulick and Willson, 1995). Some works on sex related fieldworks (e.g. Bolton, 1995) posit that active involvement has provided them with more access and has helped them built trust and obtain unique information, which might not have been possible otherwise. At the same time, other studies have shown (Bain and Nash, 2006) that the researcher does not need to be actively involved in any sexual behaviours in order to gain good data. This is not surprising, considering that fieldworks are different and context dependent, relying on both the researcher and the participants and can go in either direction. The issues come from the fact that a researcher is seen in a position of power so it can be highly unethical for them to get involved with participants (Edwards and Murtner, 2002). However, it has also been argued that after spending prolonged times on the field relationships are in a way unavoidable and are not necessarily to do with researchers using people to gain better data (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2010). Cupples (2002) argues that despite how much researchers aim to distance themselves from their sexuality and gender while on the field, it can never fully happen. As Morton (1995) account shows anthropologists are positioned on the field not

only by them but by their participants as well and can be seen as mothers, husbands, wives, sisters and sexual objects. Even if sex is avoided and no romantic relationships are created, one will still be put in a sexual position nevertheless (Cupples, 2002).

I am not making a case on whether active engagement in sexual behaviours during fieldwork should or should not happen. However, it is important to be addressed and be more reflexive on it. Fieldworks are different, and so are the researchers performing them; it is important before any research takes place for the researcher to think carefully and negotiate any possible obstacles that can happen. For instances, despite calling it 'participant observation' I was more in the position of an observer (Sanford, 2006); the participation comes from the fact that just by being in the space, the researcher alters the events and can never be invisible (McCormack, 1991). I did not see active involvement with participants to be necessary for this study, considering the premise is about men and the various ways masculinities can be performed. Different types of studies might require more in-depth involvement but this would entirely depend on the research questions. Two of the most famous independent of one another ethnographies produced on BDSM by Newmahr (2011) and Weiss (2011) are textbook examples on an active participant observation and a passive one. While Newmahr became deeply involved in the BDSM community she was studying, Weiss remained more of an observer than participant. Despite the differences in their methodological approaches, it cannot be argued that Newmahr gained more data than Weiss or that Weiss was more unbiased than Newmahr (Frank, 2015). What we can see is how the same method can be applied to the same sexual scene, albeit at different geographical locations, can be enacted very differently and produce different, yet very similar ethnographies.

I did not engage in any sexual activities or close personal contacts, except for one encounter during an event I visited. The event was quite social and it was more of a munch than a play party per se. This means the environment was open, relaxed and created with the idea for people to meet up and find likewise minded individuals to connect with. As I was the only single woman there, people did approach me to meet me and help me out. This provided ground for talking with people and building some connections. While I tried to be as unattached as possible, I did meet a friendly couple who wanted to help me and introduce me to people. After we spent some time together talking and building rapport between

each other, they asked me if I want to watch them play. I looked a bit hesitant at first and they assured me that it would just be a rope play without anything weird. I agreed and followed them to the place where some of the open space plays were happening. Another girl joined us (a friend of the couple) where she assumed the role of the 'rope bunny' (a term person who likes being tied up) and the other woman was the rope master. I sat on a chair nearby with the boyfriend and we both observed them. It was not as awkward or intrusive as I thought at first. The couple that played were happy being observed and the boyfriend and I were having a random chat. He asked me if I have ever been tied and after I said no, he asked his girlfriend to show me some techniques. She was more than happy to do it. She asked me whether I would prefer to be tied or do the tying up and I replied both. She tried some basic tying techniques on me and then her boyfriend offered to be the person to practice on. Realistically, there was nothing sexual about it. The play between the two women was definitely sensual and intimate, but after their play was done and I got involved, it was just people teaching me how to do things, the atmosphere got relaxed and I elicited lots of chuckles since tying up people required talent I clearly did not possess. While not involved in a literal sexual encounter, I was let into people's intimate space and witnessed something I would not have been allowed to if I stayed entirely on the outskirts. There is a difference, however, on what I might perceive as sexual or not compared to some of the BDSMers in there. So to say, I never participated in anything sexual, especially considering that for BDSM sex is not just about genital penetration and is very fluid (Turley, 2016), would not be correct. While not a sexual/intimate encounter for me, it could have been seen as such by some of the people observing.

3. 3. 2. Power and participant observation

When conducting the fieldwork, the issues of power need to be discussed and negotiated. As Bott (2010) points out, when conducting interviews and participant observation in 'masculine' settings as a female, power relations are difficult to pinpoint. On one hand, a researcher is in a position of power and can be treated as such by the participants, which can elicit hostility and/or wariness in some instances; on the other hand as a lone, foreign female researcher I might be perceived as 'vulnerable' and treated based on my gender and

background (Bott, 2010). As I was doing the fieldwork on my own and entering those spaces, I was very visible. The BDSM scene is characterised, as I found out, by high sociality and there were many 'cliques' at the events. People knew each other and there were many close acquaintances. After speaking to some people, they were all very surprised I was on my own and would make sure I feel as safe and welcomed as possible. People were trying to help me, guide me and making sure I was not bothered by some 'seedy' customers (even when clearly I did not need to be saved, some women were looking out for me). Since I was perceived as a newcomer people went out their way to explain things to me and some were even offering to meet up later on at different events. Now and then, there was a dose of patronising attitudes and I was approached by a few single men during most of the events, which was normal; once I explained I am not interested, I did not have issues but only understanding. BDSM relationships and plays require high doses of trust and understanding thus sexual and/or very intimate plays were not imposed on new people or people you did not know; there had to be a 'getting to know each other' stage. This is one of the reason cited by some BDSMers on why they dislike swinging fetish events. As I was told by Maya¹, a girl frequently visiting the club BDSM scene, swingers' clubs throwing BDSM theme nights do not appeal to real BDSMers, as swingers have very different sexual lifestyle. 'You see, with the swingers is all about the sex, they have different understanding of consent while within the actual BDSM scene, consent is very important and sex is unlikely to happen immediately. People need to know each other and trust each other – if someone expects you to have sex immediately, you should avoid them. This is why it is better when BDSM clubs organise swingers nights instead of swinging clubs doing BDSM nights. It's better if we teach them'. Apart from the obvious 'my sexual lifestyle is better than your sexual lifestyle' which will be discussed and analysed at a later stage, it was clear that there were rules which had to be followed and if people broke them, they could be ostracised and even banned from events, depending on the severity. It was clear how these rules were creating an environment of 'othering' where certain sexual practices were better than others and being able to fit in socially was quite important. Therefore, I was met with lots of patience and it was understandable that people tried to teach me how to act and what to expect. I

¹ All names of participants that I met during my in-person fieldwork from now on are pseudonyms chosen by the author.

hypothesise that my gender and age were contributing factors of my positionality – I was positioned as a vulnerable newcomer in need of protection and it would have been a very different story if I were a male researcher. As there was lots of caution about single males and many venues (both swinging and ‘pure’ BDSM/fetish) were quite particular about having as few as possible single males around with great emphasis on female protection. One venue made it very explicit that men are in no way allowed to touch women without their permission, however, women not touching men without permission was never mentioned.

3. 3. 3. Data collection process

As I have been using online BDSM platforms, I noticed that they can serve as an alternative to the physical BDSM scene. As I was exchanging messages with a potential interviewee at the time, he told me that he has been avoiding the physical scene for years and he prefers building relationships online. An acquaintance of him informed me that he has been disappointed by the UK fetish scene and that the scene has been changing for worse for years now. As it turns out, people create their own ways of performing BDSM using online tools since they believe that the physical BDSM scene has lost its essence and has been turned into something too mainstream, polished, policed in order to conform to social norms. This is consistent with some of the literature I have been reviewing (e.g. Dymock, 2012) and gives me a good opportunity to expand upon this existing research. A new website gaining popularity, named bdsmblr.com has been created to be the exact same as tumblr, however, it is not censored and it is all about kinks and fetishes. As such it gives anonymity to the people using it (unlike the dating BDSM sites) and people have more freedom to express their real kink desires, as well as to project their fantasies. This also means that the website also gives rich data into various BDSM practices (negative, positive and anywhere in between) thus allowing for good exploration. Furthermore, people are more open to discuss things as the website protects the users’ identities. This online data collection would be analysed through Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis along with the interviews’ scripts and the participant observation field notes (see section below on ‘Analysis’).

The online data collection process itself was straightforward and it took seven months (August 2020 – March 2021), mostly during my third year as Covid – 19 delayed the research. Four major sites were used – Fetish.com, Reddit, Tumblr and certain parts of Fetlife.com. Tumblr and Reddit were the easiest to you. With Tumblr, I collected blog posts using the search #BD/SM. Considering the fact that in 2018 the site banned most of its sexual and pornographic contents, as discussed in the Literature review, this key word search gave the most results. #Kink, #sex #somasochism was returning incomplete or no searches. The #BD/SM search returned a diverse range of posts from many users. Posts that centred around the relationship between a Dom/subs were selected. I only went through the first 100 posts that were returned from the search as they were the most relevant and without repeating data. However, with Tumblr it was difficult to narrow the search. If I typed #BD/SMmasculinites or #BD/SMmen there were no relevant searches, so I had to go with the safest one which was the #BD/SM. I was visiting Tumblr daily for a few weeks and some blogs were disappearing or getting censored very quick and there were posts that I could not find again because they were not fitting with Tumblr's policies.

Reddit was far easier for data gathering as there are no censorship issues as long as the posts are about consenting adults. Reddit was visited weekly through the span of the research with the group r/BDSMcommunity was the focus. The largest r/BDSM was mainly focusing on dating, selfies, sex pictures of users so I decided it was not appropriate for me to use due to anonymous issues and the lack of actual discussions. In the community reddit I was using the inside search function so by typing key words I could select and use posts. My main key words were 'masculinities', 'men', 'gender', 'feminism', 'trans', 'dominance', 'submission'. The last two were returning wider discussions that I had to read through in order to identify anything that was closely aligned with my research. Masculinities and men returned quite a few relevant searches. Once a discussion (based on the title) was identified as relevant to the thesis (for example it discussed masculinities, men's experiences, or overall gender roles in a BDSM context), I would collect it and go through the comments as well. I collected about 30 posts and comments from reddit simply because the community is not that active and discussions on gender and masculinities were not easy to find and were rare and between.

The site Fetish.com is relatively popular in the UK and it is mainly about identifying events but it does have a large open anonymous forum. Similarly, with reddit, I was using the inbuilt search engine to type in the same key words. I did get a few relevant searches but here I also systematically went through discussion threads to identify any relevant information. This did take me a while, but ultimately there was not that much information relevant for the thesis. With Fetlife it was similar – I went through the forum and groups section of the site where I systematically look at discussion threads that contained my keywords. Fetlife was good as it presented lengthy discussions between the users so all point of views could be captured. From these two websites I gathered 50 posts. One open blog was also selected. Here I was inspired by Cinquino’s (2020) research that used three submissive women’s blogs in order to research the role of submission in female empowerment. Drawing upon the methodology of that work, I searched for Dominant and submissive men blogs. I could not locate any submissive men blogs, but there were some blogs by Dominant men. I had to narrow the choice to only one, as it was the only active one currently that had recent posts and an in-depth activity. This blog was analysed which gave me a rich data related to the very specific ‘Alpha male Domination’. The most recent posts were collected and analysed.

Sites	Posts collected	Posts analysed
Reddit	30	26
Tumblr	40	7
Fetish.com	10	5
Fetlife	35	18
Open Blogs	One blog	7

Across all the sites I used I gathered quite a lot of posts which in turn had to be narrowed down, as the thesis has a word limit. I was also on a time limit at the time as well. I could not use all the data, so I selected only the most relevant, specifically related to masculinities posts. I had to keep the focus of the thesis as sharp as possible because this is masculinities research, not an in depth BDSM anthropological research. I had to select posts that were essentially repeating the similar information as there were clearly themes starting to emerge. I have not used screenshots on purpose – I attempted to create a reflexive and

emotive in-depth research closely analysing sentences and comments. But mainly it had to do with ethics and anonymization – I needed to keep the posts as anonymous and unidentifiable as possible. This is why I only searched through open forums, open groups and open freely available blogs. No personal information was identified of the practitioners. This is also why the research could not fully deal with issues of representation such as race issues within BDSM. I was not privy to this personal information so I cannot state a participant demographic. I do not know the practitioners' race or exact ages, only what they divulged in their comments and posts which was usually gender, sexuality and rough age (reddit had the age markers, as it is part of the site's requirements but not everyone was divulging this either). Furthermore, while I have collected very recent posts and discussions (~5 years), many users have already deleted accounts or comments. Sometimes moderators delete those as well, although reddit has an archiving system which is readily available so deleted posts can be traced). I have not been using screenshots on purpose. Williams et al. argue that while sites like Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook might allow the distribution and collection of data, this does not make it automatically ethical for researchers: '[w]hat is deeply problematic about these practices is that they have the potential to make sensitive personal information identifiable beyond the context it was intended for, and under some conditions, the publication of these data may expose users to harm' (2017: 1150). According to them in order for online research to be ethical, we need researchers to make sure that posts are fully anonymised and obscured so they cannot be traced back to people. Similarly, Darwin (2017) who researches trans gender identities on Reddit, cautions that while the Reddit forums might be public and people anonymise their identities, researchers still need to take precautions, so posts are not traced back. As such she does not use direct screenshots and she does not disclose the names of the subreddits.

Similarly, for me using actual screenshots from the websites carries the danger of identification or at least it helps people locate from which part of the site a screenshot was taken from. I am also not adding these to any appendices either.

Apart from the ethical questions, there are is also the issue of validity. Overall, my research had to adapt to the information I was finding, not the other way around. I was not fitting my discussion choices based on what I needed to see or hear. The data I found and collected created my themes in the analysis. In fact, I believe the research became more unbiased

using online data collection, since the original in person unstructured interviews were going to be based on themes I wanted to explore and enquire about. Furthermore, as already discussed in this chapter, the whole basis of the study is a qualitative interpretive approach. I was looking to create in-depth research on a limited data and I am not attempting to make any generalizations, hence why I have not focused on the quantity of the posts. In the following section I am discussing in more depth the use of the digital and the ethics and effectiveness of it.

3.3.4. Positioning the Digital

As I embarked on this PhD journey the idea for my data collection was standard and I never entertained the idea of changing my methods. I did not even think of doing virtual data collection even when the relationship between me and my gatekeeper fell through which meant that it would be very difficult for me to enter physical BDSM parties and dungeons, due to my outsider status. Yet, I did manage to find open events that were happy to host me, and despite disliking going to those events, I swore to myself I will not give up and persevere; after all that is what anthropologists do and that is the narrative I was fed during my undergraduate years (King et al, 2020). So, when Covid – 19 came about and events around the UK were banned for the foreseeable future, secretly I was happy and relieved. Digital anthropology and research have become quite popular within the discipline in the recent years, aiming to map out how cultures change due to the technological and the free sharing of cultural artefacts through the digital (Miller, 2018; Aouragh, 2018; Bluteau, 2021). When it comes to research such as mine, doing digital data collection can be more fruitful, especially to researchers who are not part of the BDSM community and/or might not want to deal with some of the risks which may be involved when it comes to visiting sex events, especially as a lone female researcher (Bloor et al, 2010). As Günel et al (2020) posit, the anthropological fieldwork and ethnography have always been highly masculinised, fetishized and seen as something similar to a rite of passage created by men for men. When women entered the anthropological discipline, they had to become ‘honorary men,’ however, years of feminist and post – colonial critique have rendered fieldworks almost unnecessary (see chapter Methodology; Schneider, 2020; Kloß, 2017).

Aside from the theoretical and feminist critique on the matter (Berry et al, 2017) there are also many practical reasons why online data collection can be better. It is also cheap, which is most welcome for a PhD student with limited funds and without scholarships. While the data I was garnering from the physical fieldwork was rich and deep, and there were some worries as to whether the online world compares to this, I would say that I learnt more about BDSM, relationships, masculinities, and the world of kink through open, anonymous forums. The positives include fast interaction, I was not wasting the time of potential participants and not privileging from their labour for my study, it can be more ethical, and it can lead to high volumes of primary data from the comfort of my own desk (Rosewarne, 2016). As the forums I was visiting were open access, fully anonymised and no personal information was available, it was easier to negotiate ethics. Furthermore, as the posts were already posted in the users' free time, there were no issues of wasting their time. I was not engaging with them either, so I was not deceiving them. Yet, gathering online data is not always in the realms of the ethical and I had to be careful to not use BDSM sites or blogs which required signing in or had explicit rules against data use (Fiesler et al, 2020). Hence why, open access blogs that allowed usage of their writings, as well as open website forums such as Reddit, Fetish.com and Fetlife's forum spaces (I was not using user's profiles on Fetlife as this is against the rules of the site thus making the practice ethically ambiguous (Fiesler et al, 2020)). Comments and discussions by anonymous users have been collected without looking or digging through people's profiles.

The process of globalization and technology is a well-researched field within anthropology and the effects it has on the modern global scene and world economies. It has been argued (Barendregt, 2020), globalization is no longer reserved just to explain economical and movement processes, but it also deals with the technological and online activities and the connectedness they offer for people. The term 'digital' in itself is an overly broad term that needs to be specifically defined and explained how it will be used in anthropological context. For the purposes of the study, digital refers to the rise and use of online platforms and social networks that people in the BDSM scene utilise. Consequently, the way digital anthropology would be used is to explore what impact technologies can have on the broader cultural and social context (Miller, 2018). At the same time, as Miller (2018: 6-7) argues, we need be careful how we use technologies:

One of the key contributions of anthropology is to counter the constant claims made about the impact of digital technologies that come from more universalising disciplines such as psychology and internet studies. Because their model is the natural sciences, they may experiment with a proximate population[...] By contrast, anthropologists are committed to an inclusive understanding of the modern world [...] What, for example, is the impact of digital communication technologies on Filipino women who migrate to care for children and the elderly across many regions? An appraisal may include studies of how the populations that remain within the Philippines use social networking platforms such as Friendster and, more recently, Facebook, to keep in touch with those who have gone abroad, but also how this now-global population of migrant workers use new media to retain a sense of Filipino sociality.

Following this, we can use digital technologies and media in order to see how people retain gender, sexual and BDSM identity in the online sphere, and what are the ways through which they express these identities. As such we can closely follow the way masculinities are being reshaped and/or upheld and the ways in which young men especially are departing from or reinforcing structural notions of masculinities. As the relationship between different people is easier observed online, we can also infer how various gender identities are working together within BDSM, how people challenge each other's biases and ideas and how the BDSM scene is transforming under wider social and cultural processes currently.

3. 3. 5. Issues with reflexivity – the position of the researcher in the field

Reflexivity has been regarded as an essential part of the research process that provides transparency of the interpretation of the data since it requires for the researcher to reflect on how the knowledge was produced and what was the relationship between it and the researcher (Malaurent and Avison, 2017). Reflexivity has been encouraged and developed predominantly through feminist research which has called reflexivity a '[...] self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self – conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher. Indeed reflexivity is critical to the conduct of fieldwork; it induces self-discovery and can lead to insights and new hypotheses about the research questions' (England, 1994).

This means that we as researchers being positioned in the field need to be aware of how we can affect the research space and how our background and influences are helping (or not) to comprehend the cultural understandings and experiences of people (Olive, 2020).

Approaching my research as a post structural feminist, reflexivity has been important in the way of collecting data and understanding people's lived experiences without reducing them to objects of research and putting myself deeply in the field. While I have situated myself within the feminist traditions of reflexivity and have drawn upon Olive's (2020) work who has been reflecting on her position as an 'insider' in the space of her research, I will have to do the exact opposite and reflect on my position as an 'outsider' in my research and how this benefitted and disadvantaged me.

Berger argued (2015) that through reflexivity we challenge that the production of knowledge is independent of the researcher who produces it and that the knowledge is objective; researchers do bring their own worldviews on the field, their gender, sexuality, age, language and so forth and this all can have implication on the study and more specifically on the access that might be granted or not to the researcher. Through the reflexion the study can be enriched since the fieldworker would have taken into account all the things from their own lives that enhanced or not the research and in terms of ethics, reflexivity makes the researcher more sympathetic and equal to the participants (Berger, 2015).

Herbert (2010) explains that reflection and reflexivity are two distinct terms and should not be used to describe the same thing; to reflect is to produce a mirror image of something and in research is the observation of our own practice and research; reflexivity is the complexification of the thinking and experience, or thinking about the experience. Through the reflexion we question what we are doing on the field so in this sense reflection and reflexivity are very similar in a way but methodologically different (Herbert 2015). The process of reflexivity has been criticised as 'indulgent' and even selfish, so the researcher has to be careful not to fall into a narcissistic loop and ignore the presence of the participants (Doyle, 2013). This critique, however, has more to do with some researchers' inability to perform proper reflexivity than with the process itself (Doyle, 2013).

As already touched upon in the previous section on participant observation, I went on the field with my history, cultural background, gender, sex, race and age. Whether we want or not, we are positioned in the field by our participants and would be treated based on the aforementioned (Sanders, 2006). A woman researching men in sexual context and their masculine performances would have implication on the study and the type of information I gather (Allain, 2014). As a single woman researcher, I did elicit some interest among the men I was studying and obtained information that might not have been given to another man; on the other hand I might have been refused some information based on my gender (Bott, 2010). I did find it difficult to navigate certain encounters and it was intense at times; as I was going into highly sexualised environment, there were men expressing interest. While generally I did not have any issues, there were a few instances where I found it very challenging to explain that I am not interested which was met with resistance and I had to deal with that person most of the night. I was warned off by an informant to not visit events as he has seen many awful things happening to women, including spiked drinks and sexual assaults. While the BDSM scene tries to self-regulate itself and aims to provide safe and consensual environment, it is not without its issues. As there are many venues that take safety seriously, there are also smaller, more underground places that might be less policed. On the other hand, my positionality was indeed helpful with the data collection. As I have already touched upon, as a woman I had less issues with access and elicited higher degree of trust among attendees. One particular encounter made me painfully aware of my own privilege within the BDSM environment. On that particular night, there were a few crossdressing men who would usually identify as men, however, they would accept female submissive identity in their BDSM interactions and would look for mistresses. One of them shared that they have been having difficulties on occasions because of their identities. Jade said they have been avoiding the BDSM scene for years due to some bad experiences but is willing to get back into it as they found some understanding and support recently. Another cross-dressing player, Ellie, remarked rather sadly when she looked at me 'You see, I will never look like you. You are a real woman. I will never be seen as a real woman, I am not small and delicate.' Then she waved over to her friend, Leah, who joined us and repeated Ellie's words. It was a very awkward conversation; I tried to encourage them and questioned the premise of 'what a real woman should look like'. I could not elicit a discussion nor I managed to convince them – I got aware of my privileged position as a biological woman

with socially accepted physical appearance. How could I argue about what a real woman is and share some 'positive thoughts' when I was clearly in an enormously advantaged position, as it was already pointed out by Ellie and Leah. Furthermore, some people were very untrusting and simply rude to them; in fact, when I was speaking with them two women that I met previously thought I was being bothered by Ellie and Leah and took me away, saying that I looked in need of saving. I really was not; Ellie tried to flirt with me a bit, but once I made it clear I was not into playing, we just chatted normally. After I reflected on the incident, I realised how fragile and sensitive my position was – there was clearly 'othering' and certain people were being excluded and pushed to the margins. My acceptance largely was due to who I was and how I was perceived. My research environment was not necessarily masculinist and the erotic capital that people brought in was important (e.g. Green, 2008). Within BDSM, women, especially single and submissive (or at least submissive *looking*) had the highest capital, thus possibly making it easier for a female researcher. Men (single, not part of a couple) were more excluded and their masculinity was policed. Men in couples who were accompanying women regardless of their BDSM orientation were welcomed and accepted. Dominant men with submissive women were the norm and their actions rarely questioned. However, men not belonging in couples were treated with suspicion and their masculinity was seen as potentially dangerous and derivative. Being in a couple (or part of a polyamorous group which was rare) was accepted without questions thus creating a very [hetero]normative and bonding environment where anyone outside of it was potentially blocked. Single women could be 'adopted' by couples and/or befriended while single men were often ostracised (or not paid attention to) and not accepted in other couples' dynamics. Hence why I had less trouble incorporating myself within events as opposed to men.

3. 3. 6. Analysing the Data: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Critical Discourse analysis.

When it comes to analysing transcripts, field notes or any other documents, Harrison (2018) talks about two general ways of approaching the data – the more rigorous, structured method (coding) and the post – coding method, which is characterized by avoidance of

finding themes and grouping findings in codes. For the purposes of this study, interpretative phenomenological analysis was employed (IPA) briefly only for the data collected during my observational fieldwork. IPA analysis involves a careful and detailed examination of fieldwork notes in order to identify occurring themes (Quinn and Clare, 2008).

Epistemologically, IPA is bounded to interpretative and phenomenological epistemologies and it analyses people's everyday experiences and ways of understanding their world (Braun and Clark, 2006). The IPA has also been described as 'double hermeneutic because the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them' (Smith et al, 2009: 3). It has been argued (Smith et al, 2009) that IPA is best utilised in relatively small and homogenous sample sizes in order to identify any convergence and divergence among the participants, as well as to give a more detailed and comprehensive look on individual experiences. The phenomenological analysis is focused on the individuals' experiences and interactions with their environment (Biggerstaff and Thompson, 2008) hence why this approach has been selected for the fieldwork part of the data collection. The BDSM scene is specific and context dependent, as already discussed, thus it is important to identify how individuals understand, interact and interpret their experiences in such a particular space. Furthermore, the detailed and person specific nature of the IPA would allow for the more in depth understanding of the individual motivations behind masculine performances and how they are influenced by the BDSM scene.

However, IPA could only be used during the very short in person fieldwork and as such it was not my main analysis method. The analysis of the forums and comments that were gathered in the second part of my data collection were analysed through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). As argued by Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000) CDA is a versatile tool used often in anthropological studies to analyse topics such as ideology, race, gender, power, media language, etc. in order to see the use of language in oppression and representation. CDA has also been popular in feminist research and as Tenorio (2011) argues, in feminist critical discourse analysis the attention is directed towards understanding gender as dynamic construct and the construction of gender identities. As my thesis looks exactly at this, it was only logical that CDA would help me pick apart how masculinities work within BDSM and their relations with various gender constructs. By analysing these forums and people's writings, I could see how men used language not just to oppress (although this was

present), but also to create their own understanding of masculinities and to make sense of their own lives and their use of masculinity. CDA was helpful to analyse where oppression was happening, such as transphobia, through the participants' use of language rooted into gender essentialism in order to exclude and even villainize people.

When analysing the forum discussions and commentaries, these were broken down and analysed carefully phrase by phrase in order to make sense of the participants' words and to achieve the double 'hermeneutics' as discussed above. The data was reduced, however, due to the timeframe of the research as it was becoming very laborious to perform the manual linguistic analysis.

3. 4. Ethical Considerations in Sexuality Research: Mitigating dangers and risks

Hammersley (1999) argued that ethics in qualitative research were turning into 'ethicism', enforced by postmodernism and the need to do some type of social justice and for him this obsession with ethics started to take away what really research is about, consequently preventing the use of research technique that could help with the gaining of knowledge. However, it has been posited (Edwards and Mauthner, 2002) that Hammersley's scepticism did not reflect the fact that ethical consideration were a genuine and legitimate concern with issues of power and representation, which was something anthropological research was struggling with for the better part of the twentieth century. Ethics are an important aspect of a research process and any issues that might arise during research need to be negotiated beforehand in order to minimize the potential risks for both the participants and the researcher. In high-risk research projects it is important to guarantee the anonymity of the participants and the careful handling of any sensitive data that might be entrusted to the researcher (Williams et al, 2017). As Williams et al write: 'deriving sensitive information and making conclusions about a person or persons' views or philosophy and publicly releasing this information without anonymisation could lead to stigmatization or actual bodily harm' (2017: 32). As part of the ethical process required by the university's policies, the appropriate documentation has been filled and assessed and the project underwent the ethical committee's approval. The data I obtained were stored carefully with accordance to

the university's policy and recommendations. Regardless that I am not working with vulnerable groups, the risks and ethical issues arise from the fact that the research is connected to sex and gender, which are treated as sensitive topics. While I was a witness of a quite a few intimate BDSM plays, they were all performed for the 'public' in order to satisfy exhibitionist and voyeuristic desires. If people did not want to be watched during a play, they would go to the private areas which I made sure to avoid. However, the ethics protocols did not understand or include specific information on sex research or my personal safety.

3.4.1 The lone female researcher: the Dark side of academia

Here I would like to bring attention to something that is unfortunately not spoken about enough in anthropological research and I believe that universities in general are not equipped very well in protecting their PhD students field research. Namely the dangers associated with performing fieldwork research and the lack of safety nets and support available in case things go awry.

Participant observation fieldwork is a good method for the collection of rich data and for performing good research. As a 'baby' undergraduate anthropologist at the University of Wales, I was taught many important things but the most important was 'No matter what you do, you are anthropologists, and it is not supposed to be easy. You need to persevere always.' This type of motivational advice was accepted by me, internalised and unfortunately became the type of toxic thing that could eventually put me in danger. This whole idea of the anthropologist going out there, doing the participant observation fieldwork, being the best researcher and absolutely putting your research above anything else is way too common in anthropology but unfortunately it is a masculinist and privileged way of thinking (Douglas – Jones et al, 2020). In other words, the concept of 'fieldwork' is surrounded by notions of bravery, trial, adventure, and strength which do carry modernist gendered connotations usually associated with 'men' (Douglas – Jones et al, 2020). The anthropological feminist reflective work criticising the dangerous and highly romanticised view of the fieldwork is not spoken about enough and it was not covered in my undergraduate course.

The anthropological fieldwork has had to go under many changes rightfully so in order to avoid the colonial gazing, yet anthropologists can still perform the 'pornographic' gazing and voyeurism: '[s]o if there is no final escape from the legacies of colonialism only a reworking of colonial legacy, in itself a highly contingent and variant set of circumstances when viewed cross-culturally, then the role of the sexual and violent in cross-cultural relationships is ever present; a concern today no less than about yesterday' (Whitehead and Sigal, 2020: 245). Even before reading the volume *Ethnopornography* (2020) I remember making a joke to my PhD friends when I started my research – I said that the line between an anthropologist and a creep is a thin one. My friend laughed and said she loves my dry humour. But the more I thought about it, the more uncomfortable I got because it was not really a joke, was it?

Anthropology currently has academics from various racial, gender and sexual backgrounds so we need to start restructuring fieldwork by taking all of this into account. The problem is that anthropology started as a science done by white Western men and most of the techniques and methods associated with it (far away travelling, extended periods of participant observation, gazing from powerful position) have been done to suit these affluent white men (Schneider, 2020). These very masculinized methods had to be adopted by female anthropologists when they were entering the field in order to prove their worth, that they were 'one of the boys', aka the other predominantly male anthropologists and academics (Behar, 1996). Anthropology was in a way a 'gentlemen club' and everyone who was not fitting with the 'acceptable' racial and gendered dynamics would have pretend that they belong by acting accordingly (Johnson, 2017).

I knew that for my PhD I had to come up with a high quality fieldwork. I wanted to do a PhD after all, a good fieldwork could set me apart from other students. So doing fieldwork in BDSM sex clubs around the UK, even though I have never visited one before, seemed like a great idea when I was applying for the program. I got myself a 'gatekeeper', I knew exactly what to do and with the greatest confidence told my future supervisor I will be doing a participant – observation fieldwork to get some rich data. Once I arrived at Newcastle it became clear that this type of fieldwork would be challenging, if not impossible. I could not travel around the UK going to sex clubs all alone as I had no car and no funding. I was a self-funded student with a loan from the Student Loan Company that was barely covering my tuition fees and rent. The university was not offering much help either. I had to get trains

and hotels to stay in the cities I was supposed to visit which was expensive. Furthermore, what about my personal safety? Would I be assaulted in those clubs? I remember tossing around at night reliving some past traumas and creating new anxieties for myself. But I could not talk to anyone. I was worried that my supervisors would think I am a fraud who does not deserve to do a PhD and I was so desperate to be in academia. This should not be seen as a comment on my supervisors; in reality this is about an academic culture that requires individuals to succeed. At the time I was too afraid, and I did not know better.

My aspirations for my fieldwork started falling apart when my relationship with my gatekeeper fell through but this is something I cover later in the chapter. Yet I managed to get access to the field.

The main problem was the money. Doing a PhD without funding is extremely difficult, so I had to get money by going through my savings, part time jobs wherever I could, asking my mother for help and whatever financial help I could get from my department. The money problem was very stressful. Doing a good fieldwork requires capital and money, and this is again never talked about. Unfortunately, many people without financial stability might not be able to complete anthropological research considering how important fieldwork is. Eventually, I somehow managed to sort myself out financially. Then the issue of my safety came about.

When I was filling in the ethics forms in order to be granted permission to perform my fieldwork, almost all of it was about protecting my participants and protecting the university. There was only one single question asking about my safety and I needed additional ethics approval as well. How ethical was that fieldwork for me? I mean, of course ethics are important, and our participants need to be protected at all costs but not a single thing about my protection was discussed. The issue for me is that ethics are looking at 'the Researcher' as a whole objective entity and do not take into account the subjectivities and position of each individual researcher applying for ethics (Schneider, 2020). Not all anthropological research is the same and not always the researcher is the one with the ultimate power. This all brings me back to the idea of the masculine powerful researcher, 'penetrating' the field (Johnson, 2017). There was a Risk assessment form that I had to fill in just before leaving for the field but it was not really Risk assessment assessing my research, as it was standard for all students.

(The below are taken from my personal field notes)

Exhibit A: *Going into my fieldwork was fine at first. The first event I visited was a fetish market in the Midlands during the day, so it was perfectly safe, there were many people shopping and socialising as well as workshops and BDSM demos. However, the second event I visited things started to get more real. It was a BDSM party for 'newbies' (people who want to get into the BDSM scene but have never experienced it before) and it was very accepting, and people were nice. I did not know anyone, so I was walking around the event just getting comfortable when I got approached by a man in his 50s. At first there were no alarm bells setting off in my head. The man was polite and having a normal conversation with me. I was polite as well and kept engaging in conversation with him because why should not I? It was a social event and he explained to me he does not know anyone; it is his second time at a BDSM event, and he is anxious. Great, I found a friend! When the conversation got exhausted and there was nothing else to talk about, I strategically walked away to find a seat because my feet were killing me. Lo and behold, he sat right next to me. Then I realised that he was seeing me as a potential sexual partner. The compliments started pouring, he kept going on about my appearance, about my 'sexy Russian or Slovakian?' accent and so on. I did not know what to do. I could not tell him I was a researcher because that would mean to give away my personal information and quite frankly that man started creeping me out. I did not want to engage with him anymore. Telling him to 'piss off' felt too mean, after all he was at a BDSM event, being flirted with and engaged in sexual conversation was a given. I was the entitled outsider invading this space, so I felt the need to just suck it up and not make him uncomfortable. Plus who was to know that he would not get aggressive if I deny his advances? Possible sexual violence was no longer just an abject fear fleetingly mentioned in my Risk assessment form. It was a real objective possibility that started forming. When it was time to leave, I said my goodbyes to the man who begged me to stay longer but I already booked an Uber to take me to my hotel. I left quickly and waited for the Uber outside on the street. It was a dark cold October night and the Uber driver texted me he is going to be a bit late. There was no one around me and then I heard some footsteps behind me. I turned around and the same man was standing behind me, exiting from the club. I must have looked super shocked because he lifted his hands and immediately said: 'Don't be afraid! I am not stalking you or anything' and then laughed. I was too stunned to*

laugh, now I was definitely thinking he was stalking me. He approached me again telling me that he does not want to let me go and he wants to know me better. I declined politely because I did not want to get aggressive in case that got him aggressive. I kept glancing at my phone trying to locate the Uber on the map. The car was getting closer, so I was trying to remain calm. Then the man came closer to me telling me he had parked his car just down the street. He told me we can have some fun and he has some weed stashed so I would definitely enjoy myself. I could not even run because I suck at running and I was wearing stiletto heels. I kept declining politely with a smile to keep him docile, but all I wanted to do was yell at him to leave me alone. Finally, my Uber arrived, and he begged me not to get in it, but I ignored him. Crossing the hotel lobby and going into my room was the best feeling ever. I was safe and nothing happened to me! I called myself stupid and berated myself for being scared. Nothing happened, I was just being paranoid.

Exhibit B: *Here the example is not technically connected to the BDSM event per se, but on the way to attend it. As we know from Rubin (1984) S/M practices are pushed to the margin in the 'outer circle' of acceptable social behaviours in a symbolic way. However, as I was looking at BDSM events and clubs to attend, it was clear that the 'outer circle' is not necessarily abstract but literal. Most sex clubs and venues hosting BDSM and fetish nights were literally situated in the margin of cities, in the outskirts usually hidden in very industrial zones away from the city centres. So, this can pose an extra challenge or fears for some people to attend these events. The sex club I had to attend at the end of November 2019, was unfortunately located quite far from the city centre of a famous UK city and I could not find a hotel nearby, so I had to stay in the city centre. The event started at 9pm and I did not want to be early, so I called an Uber around 9:15 giving me enough time to arrive and not to be the first one. I gave the exact address of the venue and the car dropped me off in some industrial car repair zone and drove off. There was not a living soul around me, it was quite dark and it was just some factories. Now, I was dressed for a sex club and based on the dress code, I wore a lacy black crop top, short skirt, sheer black tights, heels, and a long black coat. I started feeling... vulnerable? Exposed? Quite scared, but I told myself I need to pull myself together and find the venue as soon as possible. I googled the address again on google maps and realised that the Uber driver left me on the opposite end of the street where the venue was. And since it was a very long street it meant I had to walk 15 minutes. It was fine, I could*

do that. I shared my location with my husband and called him just to hear his voice. I was walking and it was looking like a horror movie. I mean, I guess it seemed scarier than it was because I was already feeling terrified, and this probably exaggerated how dangerous the whole situation was in my eyes. My husband was following my steps on the map telling me I am definitely on the right track to the club and I should be there soon. Thankfully the creepy industrial zone ended, and I saw that now there was a residential area. It was only about 9:30 pm so I calmed down and told my husband I will be fine. I hung up the phone and was walking a bit calmer now until a car started driving very slowly next to me on the street. I did not pay attention at first, but the window rolled down and it was a young man driving. He started talking to me and asked me if I am OK. I politely replied that I am fine and kept walking. However, he did not leave me alone. He kept engaging in a conversation with me and then told me: 'How about you come into my car babe, I will take you wherever you want. You shouldn't be walking alone like that.' I said no and picked up my pace but again, he would not leave me. He kept slowing down and just talking to me and asking me to go into the car with him. There was no one around me, I was all alone, and I swear I have never been so terrified. I picked up the phone and called my husband again pretending I am meeting him soon. And the dude just kept making me go into his car! He would not leave me alone. I just wanted to cry, I did not want to be kidnapped, raped or killed in a random city away from everyone I love. Even typing this out now makes my palm sweat and my heart goes faster. My husband started freaking out on the other end of the line as he realised, I might be in danger. For a moment I believed the man would go out from the car, grab me, and shove me in there. He told me not to be afraid and that he just wants to help me out. I was walking faster hoping I am reaching the venue soon. And then finally from one of the houses an elderly couple walked out and started chatting next to me and then I saw some other people around. When the guy noticed the people, he yelled something at me which I did not hear and just drove off finally leaving me alone. A car stopped nearby where a couple clearly dressed for a BDSM event came out and I went quickly asking them if they know where the club was. They looked at me and said they are headed there, and it is literally a minute away. We introduced each other, they were very nice and were basically looking out for me the entire night.

I was lucky. Really, really lucky. I had a few nightmares randomly about this event and would wake up at night with relief in my bed alive and safe. Despite this, I still tried to downplay the whole thing. I mean, nothing happened after all! Maybe the guy genuinely wanted to help me. I have got to admit that the only reason why I was so scared was because it was a man. If it was a woman in the car asking to help, I would have been more receptive and trusting. I was telling this to my husband, and he cut me off saying that I did not overreact, the guy was acting dodgy and even if he was genuinely a nice person, I do not owe men my trust and I should not go into random women's cars either. And he was right, I needed to take things seriously. I just really did not want to admit that something potentially very dangerous happened to me and that I was so close to being a sad statistic on the news. Nobody wants to be a victim. Being in denial is not nice. I knew I had to change my methods. Even though I spoke to my supervisor about this (I still downplayed the incident though, because I felt really embarrassed) and he completely backed me up about changing my methods and do what is best for me, I still felt guilty. I wanted to prove myself, I wanted a good data. And I would get it only if I went back on the field. And I did. I went one last time in March 2020, and I finally promised myself that is it. This is not for me. I hate it, I do not want to do it, I would rather shoot myself in the left foot than go back. I had to change to online data collection performing it in the comfort of my home. Luckily for me in a way, covid lockdowns hit, closing venues for the time being which meant I had to stick to the online collection. And I did. It was the best thing.

I am arguing that the University could have had more training for PhD students and better understanding into sociological and anthropological in person field research. While I anticipated some risks, these were quite removed from lived out realities. As such, I do not believe that the ethics form was necessarily helpful for me and the comments I received from the ethics board were about the participants' safety and the data storage.

As Günel et al (2020) are arguing, the anthropological fieldwork has been placed under scrutiny for a while now due to its still colonial and white connotations. Many researchers cannot afford to spend long periods of time on the field due to family obligations, financial precarity and marginalisation. Women of colour have spoken out how difficult it is for them to perform anthropological fieldwork because they have to often navigate sexual and racial tensions on the field and the dangers associated with gendered and racialised bodies (Berry

et al, 2017). As Berry reflects on her research as a Black female anthropologist in Cuba, she shows the dangers following Black women alone on the field which is not something white women have to necessarily worry about. As she was sexually assaulted in the house where she was staying by the white owner, she was told by the house keepers that she was mistaken for a Black Cuban woman. If they knew she was American or a tourist, she would not have been touched as there is fear of driving away white tourists and Americans (2017). Berry's harrowing incident reveals a much scarier picture and commentary on institutional racism in Cuba and the treatment of Black women which is then extended to Black researchers who are placed in the same vulnerable position. This is something that would not have happened to a white male anthropologist and even a white female anthropologist. It is very clear how intrinsically 'white', masculinized and privileged the anthropological fieldwork is, yet this is not spoken enough during anthropological and methodological trainings. Berry et al (2017: 540) explain this by saying:

A common response used to silence these discussions is the notion that our relative privilege as academics mitigates the gender violence we encounter in the field and, that by raising the critique, we are setting ourselves apart from the experiences of women in "the community" writ large. We acknowledge how our relative privilege, as women who have completed graduate studies in U.S. institutions, could distance us from the unforeseen consequences of our engagements in the field after we finish our research and leave. We hold this acknowledgment in tension with the consideration that we are not merely conducting research but are connected to the places where we work through familial ties, diasporic relationships, and investments in political struggles, all of which hold us account-able even after our departure.

It is obvious that as researchers we are automatically 'granted' some privilege which I am arguing is a remnant from anthropology's colonial past and its masculinized performance. However, we cannot treat all anthropologists the same way without discussing issues surrounding racism and gendered violence as based on their background, researchers are not in fact granted the same privileges on the field.

As an example here, when I was in my first year of my PhD in 2019, I had to go undergo Faculty training. The second semester was all about methods and methodologies. I attended a session on unstructured and semi structured interviewing because at the time this was

going to be my second method before I had to abandon it. The session itself was interesting and useful but it focused explicitly on our privilege as researchers and all the ethics surrounding the interviewing process and how no matter what we need to protect our participants. At the end we were asked whether we have any questions, and one woman raised her hand and asked 'Well, we understand that obviously we need to be careful with our participants and protect them but what about us? What about the dangers surrounding us as researchers? It is as if no one cares about us.' The lecturer leading the session replied with: 'Yes, of course you need to be careful that is also important'. Yet, she did not elaborate, she did not say how we can protect ourselves. There was no discussion about the possible gendered and racialised violence that can follow some PhD students on the field, not once was there a reflection on the white privilege in field research and interviewing. Overall, none of the methodological training included anything about reflexion on our positions as researchers and the dangers associated with it. In fact, only recently (the same week as I am writing this in May 2022) there was a workshop organised by an independent faculty institute that dealt with the vulnerabilities of being a researcher and the toll that some High-risk research can take on people's mental health.

I do want to open a caveat here. I do not want this to be taken wrongly and to mean that I think physical BDSM communities and parties are dangerous and creepy. In fact, I have some really good memories of my fieldwork and met amazing people. A BDSM party realistically was not more dangerous than any other student party for example. I felt quite safe most of the time and the people there were lovely. But that does not mean that we need to romanticise and minimize the dangers in sex related research. As I would show in the following Analysis chapters, many BDSM practitioners are putting physical parties under scrutiny and many people prefer to no attend events but to perform BDSM on their own or to meet people in online BDSM spaces. I also need to reflect on my own white privilege here. BDSM parties and in general the scene can be quite white dominated and middle class (Weiss, 2006). Most of the events I have visited were predominantly white with POC being in the minority. As a white woman I have not had to deal with racialised violence or marginalisation, and I could 'fit' easy. Unfortunately, as Erickson et al (2021) have shown, POC within the BDSM scene can feel excluded or heavily fetishized and not seen as equal participants. Consequently, non – white female researchers can also experience the same

racialized dynamics and research into BDSM can become problematic and mentally exhausting for researchers of colour very quick very fast. Furthermore, my cis and heterosexual privilege was definitely helping me, as people were more likely to protect me or help me out as I was a single woman attending those events. In section 3.3.5 *Reflexivity* and in Chapter 4 I am reflecting on my cis privilege as well as some of the transphobic incidents and attitudes that BDSM events are not immune to unfortunately. While BDSM overall is a very accepting community that does not necessarily operate within heteronormative and binary structures, transmisogyny against trans women is not unheard off. Again, this can put trans and queer researchers in a vulnerable position and potentially restrict their access.

There needs to be a larger restructuring of fieldwork research that acknowledges the issues that have been brought up so far because it should not be up to the individual researchers to try and find alternative ways of performing research that then might be deemed 'not as good'. One of the main reasons I wanted to keep performing participant observation and being out there in the field was because I was scared that if I choose an alternative method, my data would be less good, therefore my PhD would suffer, and I might fail. I was worried when I decided to switch to online data collection even though this was better for me because being out there on the field helped me capture some unique and rich observations that I thought would not be possible through online data collection. In other words, I had to choose between my wellbeing and the quality of my research. This would mean that certain fields and research can be 'closed off' for researchers who might be vulnerable, therefore the whole white privileged cycle of research keeps going on and excluding many researchers. Placing the onus on researchers to deal with the consequences of field research and to either compromise or push through is an unfair one that can just lead to more victim blaming, exclusion, marginalisation and dangers. As Steffen (2017) writes:

Similarly, blaming Henrietta allows anthropologists to deny their own lack of control in the field; more specifically, it allows anthropologists to deny the existence of gendered vulnerability in the field. The debate in *Anthropology News* can be represented as a tension between two positions: the ideal political one, represented by Tannen, and the ruthless, pragmatic one, represented by Woodbury. Politically, women *should* be able to do research *as if* there will not be gendered consequences;

pragmatically, people like Woodbury insist that if women would not be “stupid” and expose themselves, they would not be raped.

Steffen (2017) brings up the crucial point that many anthropologists are still fighting for their professional legitimacy (such as women, POC, queer and non-straight anthropologists), thus blaming individual researchers who fell victims of gendered or racialized violence is much easier than blaming the science and fieldwork research as a whole because then this would mean that anthropology indeed should not be performed by anyone who is not white, cis, straight man. However, the whole discipline and field research need to be put under scrutiny, deconstructed and rebuilt again in order to allow for researchers from different backgrounds to perform safe research without the fear of ‘not being good enough’. In other words, we should not be pushing for some methods because they are ‘better’ and would produce research with more quality but to make methods equal and make them work for individual researchers. Currently, online data collection and digital ethnographies are becoming more and more popular, and Günel et al (2020) have proposed the use of patchwork ethnographies. This would mean that researchers can combine ‘home’ and ‘field’ by going on the field for short periods of times using fragmentary data and other innovations. There are certainly ways to create new ways of obtaining knowledge that is both gentle and safe for participants and researchers alike. Unfortunately, the voices of many anthropologists have been silenced throughout the years and outdated methods of data research have remained the norm and are placed on a higher pedestal, but it is time to break with the modernist notions of how science and humanities should be performed.

3. 5. Conclusion

This chapter offered a discussion on the research design that would be undertaken for this study. The philosophical positions were outlined in order to help to situate myself in the field as a researcher and justify the way I am approaching and interpreting the data. Constructivist ontology paired with interpretive epistemology have been identified as the most appropriate for the study of gender and more specifically the varied manifestations of masculinities in the context of BDSM. The research is situated in Clifford Geertz’s interpretivism and tradition of thick description, which serves to understand a certain

phenomenon with more depth and find out how people know and interpret their own cultures. Therefore, approaching a field through thick description also places the studied phenomenon into context and does not allow for generalizations to occur. Qualitative methods, such as participant observation and semi – structured interviews were selected to ensure the richness and thickness of the data, as well as the validity and reliability of it. Interpretive phenomenological analysis would be conducted to understand with more depth the way men perform their masculinities and how they navigate their identities in modern day sexual cultures. Issues of ethics, reflexivity and validity were also discussed, and appropriate measures would be taken to ensure the proper conduct of the research and the well being and comfort of the participants involved in it.

Chapter 4:

Analysing Dominance, Submission and Masculinities: Challenging and Enforcing Gender Expressions through Eroticism

4. 1. Introduction: BDSM in online contexts

The literature review discussed several criticisms aimed at current masculinity theories and suggested a reconfiguring and even departing from the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity'. In this first analysis chapter, I will connect the theoretical criticism I pointed at the masculinity theories with some of the data gathered through the online fieldwork. As a quick overview, this chapter will first delve deeper into some of the theories surrounding masculinities, and then I will position myself into those theories and use the data as an analytical tool to show that masculinities in the BDSM context can depart from and also fit within said theories. The chapter looks at both male dominance and submission within BDSM. The data would cover online fieldwork conducted among open-access sites and forums, featuring comments and discussions by BDSM participants.

Within the following sections, the discussion covers the way submission and dominance in BDSM contexts can both reinforce and, at the same time, challenge patriarchal relations, thus providing new ways of looking at masculinities. I will be primarily drawing upon Waling (2019a, 2019b), Beasley (2015), and Berggren (2014) and on certain aspects of hybrid masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). I would like to open a caveat when it comes to the latter – hybrid masculinity theory has many shortcomings as I believe it does not productively engage with post – structural gender discourses and subjectivities. Nevertheless, it can be helpful to frame and study how gender inequalities are still reproduced (Berggren, 2014, Seidler, 2006a; 2006b).

This section will be followed by delving deeper into the submissive performances that men undertake and exploring how submission can often push against popular discourses of

masculinities yet also reproduce a certain set of discourses that might enforce dichotomies between what is acceptable and unacceptable. For example, the way submission is framed by some practitioners where 'having a spine' is desirable as opposed to being a 'useless doormat' in a Dom/sub relationship. As a result, people can reframe submission and still make it about strength, dignity and power, which is already associated with masculinities in popular discourses (Simula and Sumerau, 2017). Of course, it is also important to note that the ways submission is experienced within BDSM does not mean what it means in 'everyday life' (Carlström (2017)). The connection between the two is contextual and depends on someone's understanding, needs and desires, with the line between the two constantly shifting, thus showing the instability of power, reminiscent of Foucault's observation on S/M dynamics (1997).

Consequently, the chapter will discuss the Dominance performances that some men enact as part of their BDSM plays in order to challenge notions that prioritize power play and the way masculinities enact it. In this sense, I argue that similarly to how submission is framed, being a Dom can also privilege ideas of being gentle, caring, strong and a 'real man', thus possibly positioning certain masculine ideals as better than others. New ways of being a Dominant can still prioritize a classic understanding of masculinities. By analysing the blog of a popular sensual Dom, this thesis argues that some Dominant men can perform these classic masculinities and play into neoliberalism. This will lead to the final section, where I explore how masculinities and hierarchy can be fetishized, thus stripping power away from them and making them playful, erotic and desired.

4. 2. Men performing masculinities: Where do we stand?

4. 2. 1. Introduction and Overview

A criticism of MMS (Men and Masculinity studies) and the theories surrounding masculinities is their often-inherent essentialism and modernist structural aspirations (Waling, 2019a). Masculinities are studied through fixed types without in-depth engagement with feminism, post-structuralism and queer theory (Beasley, 2015). Furthermore, as Berggren argues (2014), masculinity theories rarely, if ever, engage with feminist

subjectivities and reflection, thus making said theories often removed from men's everyday lived experiences. He writes: 'I will now turn to poststructuralist feminism and feminist phenomenology—two major traditions of contemporary feminist theory that have been important in advancing our understanding of subjectivity but that have been comparatively little discussed within critical studies on men' (2014: 236). Hegemonic masculinities, which is the framework most often used to describe masculinity types and their relationships with one another by Men and Masculinity Studies, has been criticised due to its rigidity, typology and even outdatedness (Johansson and Ottemo, 2015).

Based on my literature review, I proposed that the way hegemonic masculinities are seen does not reflect the actual term 'hegemony'. My critique was influenced by the poststructuralist theorizations of Laclau and Mouffe (1985). Consequently, the thesis argues that it is important to have consistency with how the term 'hegemonic' is employed, in that it should be used as its original intent (Connell, 1995). Hegemonic masculinities are the masculinities that are most popular in a given context and timeframe, albeit not easily achievable, something Connell herself was contending (2005; 1998), not a fixed type of negative masculinity. As a result, the reimagining of hegemony and masculinities, in general, should allow to account for the post-modern breaking of gender binaries and avoid notions of essentialism, which have dominated the masculinity academic discourses (Johanson and Ottemo, 2015). As the widespread notion of hegemonic masculinity is inherently essential and unchanging, despite being conceived as a theory that should allow the contingency within masculinities, this thesis argues that it no longer accounts for the way gender and gender performances are negotiated in the current historical process of sexualisation. (Duschinsky, 2013). However, as hegemonic masculinity is still very much prevailing and important, slowly reimagining it would be an acceptable course of action, as dismissing it entirely might not be possible. As I depart from post-structuralism and feminism, wherein the inherent binary of man/woman is challenged and rejected (Homer, 2004), using five constant types of fixed masculinities seems restrictive and redundant in taking masculinities' scholarship forward. As Paechter (2018) highlights, a pressing issue with hegemonic masculinities and the related types, as well as the scholarship on hegemonic (emphasised) femininities, is that it all rests upon essential gender types related respectively to the male and female bodies. Furthermore, masculinities and femininities are looked at as constants

across time and location, which is problematic as gender relations, and gender performances are not the same at any given time, nor are they constricted to specific bodies (Paechter, 2018), something that is especially true for sexual cultures, such as BDSM, which was contended in the previous chapter. As Paechter further argues,

I think our definition needs also to attempt to avoid essentialism, so that being a man, for example, or behaving in masculine ways, is not tied to a particular bodily form. We need to be able, among other things, to include the possibility of people identifying as men, with bodies recognised as male, acting in significantly, and even, hegemonically, feminine ways, and also to ensure that we do not exclude from hegemonically masculine or feminine performances those people who do not identify as male or female at all. (2018: 124).

As a result, the constricting frame of the five masculinity types implies that men can only choose to fit within predetermined types of masculinities. That is, a man might create masculinities based on predicted types that do not account for people's actual lived experiences (Groes – Green, 2012).

As BDSM offers many contexts and ways of exploring oneself, it would mean that men would have the ability to perform highly malleable masculinities that demonstrate many facets at different points. Although we need to be careful not to overstate fluidity, BDSM roles such as dominance, submission and switching might allow people to explore dynamics beyond what is imposed on them or what they are supposed to be based on fixed structures. As the following example shows,

I think people are increasingly uninterested in in being boxed in with inflexible labels. That becomes even more true when people as people are in the scene longer. Many people learn over years and decades of play that that sometimes chemistry brings out unexpected facets in ones play and sometimes a particular activity is intriguing even it goes against what you normally do. People also get bored, frustrated, feel trapped/pigeonholed, and a host of other things. (online fieldwork, BDSM forum, August 2020).

MMS (Men and Masculinity studies) discusses masculinities through the types and structures that men have to adhere to. Consequently, masculinity becomes an all-male-

encompassing system that has been 'gifted' to men, and they need to take responsibility for it (Waling, 2019a). As Waling notes (2019a), the constant urge to make men fit in pre-set types of masculinities (for example, 'healthy masculinity' and 'toxic masculinity') means that men can only choose from what is available, thus undermining other expressions that might not be necessarily fitting in a definition of masculinity:

In using terms such as 'healthy masculinity', we continue to privilege and set up masculinity as the only expression of gender that men and boys can engage with and in doing so, perpetuate the continued devaluation of femininity[...] (2019a: 370).

In this sense, it is important to open up 'masculinities' so we can avoid the devaluation mentioned above of other gender expressions, such as 'femininity'. By continuing to enforce the types of masculinities that men and boys need to follow, we are not effectively engaging with eroding down binaries and strict identities. As Waling continues:

Instead of breaking down gender binaries that enable the cross-engagement of a variety of practices of masculinity and femininity, regardless of gender identity, (or the de-gendering of such traits) we are in actuality, building up new ones to continue to fixate expressions of masculinity with a male assigned-sexed body. In doing so, we continue to position anything considered 'not-masculine' or feminine, as lesser. (2019a: 370).

The eroding of gender binaries is achievable, and it is what we need to reach in order to break down the patriarchal and structural gender roles. However, masculinity theories do not necessarily destabilize power by promoting these types of masculinities because, as Waling points out, it is as if we cannot imagine men performing anything else but 'masculinity'. Furthermore, the way MMS keeps studying masculinities also does not always respond to men's real-life experiences (Berggren, 2014) since more and more people are actively pushing against labels and tight frameworks that they have to fit within, as I demonstrated with my previous fieldwork example. As Waling (2019b) argues, feminism does not study different types of femininities that are available to women to choose from but instead engages and explores how practices of femininities are experienced by women in a very contextual way, employing subjectivity, reflexivity and cultural forces to examine

whether oppression, empowerment or both occurs. Often within MMS, feminist theories and feminist thinkers are overlooked (O'Neill, 2015), thus maintaining a major gap between masculinity studies and feminism (Beasley, 2015).

Furthermore, some theorizations on masculinities (a popular example being the 'inclusive masculinities' framework by Anderson (2009)) can be read as inherently anti-feminist and, on occasion, misogynistic as they often exclude women and feminist thinkers from the conversation. These theories overlook the relationship between masculinities and femininities, thus failing to highlight how oppression works and how men and women can actively produce and reproduce patriarchal relations (O'Neill, 2015). As a result, while these works can occasionally employ feminist terms, they do not necessarily problematize the inherent structures and essentialism surrounding masculinities which is something that feminist and queer theories have been doing, thus failing to use feminism properly (Waling, 2019a).

The hybrid masculinities framework aims to explain how men can selectively incorporate aspects from femininities and other masculinities in order for them to create new ways of being masculine and seemingly distance themselves from hegemonic practices and patriarchal values, and it can be useful to map out the way gender inequalities are reproduced (Gruys and Munsch, 2020). One might argue that a disadvantage of this framework is that it relies too much on Connell's classic (1995) masculinities system. That is, in order, for the hybrid masculinities framework to exist, men are selectively incorporating mostly positive aspects of the types of masculinities that are not hegemonic in order to resist patriarchy (Gruys and Munsch, 2020). At the same time, while it might seem that men are disavowing what some might refer to as 'toxic masculinities', they can also replicate the exact same oppressive structures they are seemingly rejecting (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014).

While the hybrid masculinities framework is deeply rooted in structuralism and relies on typifying masculinities into distinct fixed categories, it can still be helpful to explore how men can upkeep the status quo without trying to do so and how this can be illustrated within BDSM. I contend that it is still possible for the theory behind hybrid masculinities to be employed while keeping in mind the post-structural fluidness of the way modern masculinities are represented and avoiding the structural typology governing Connell's masculinities types. An interesting post-structural and feminist approach to masculinities

which I will be drawing upon in order to map men's BDSM experiences in the following sections and one that keeps in mind the feminist critiques of the MMS is offered by Berggren (2014) with his 'sticky masculinity' framework, aiming to bring feminist subjectivity and phenomenology into the studies on masculinities.

Taking into consideration the criticisms posed at the masculinity studies by a range of feminist and critical masculinity studies theorists, the following sections provide an analysis of the submission, dominance and cuckolding among men and complicate the way masculinities are theorized and showcase how difficult it is to typify and box men's lived experiences. As BDSM often does rely on the connection between partners, often men with women, it is crucial not to exclude women and femininities from the analysis.

4. 2. 2. Submitting Masculinities: Tales of 1001 spankings

The perfect sub would be someone who obeys you and cares about you as their Dom/me but that doesn't mean being a doormat. But I don't mean a brat either! A disciplined, strong person knowing exactly what they want and how to please. God, I love pony girls! They are so disciplined! (fieldnotes, October 2019).

As mentioned in the literature, I would restate the definitions and outline what a 'submissive' means in the specific BDSM context. The word has little to do with its everyday use and its implication on gender relations is also very different (Weiss, 2015). However, giving a definition in BDSM context would still be too broad and I would not be able to capture the nuances and layers encompassing 'submission' and 'a submissive' since even in smaller scale roleplays, these words can mean different things to the participating players (Weiss, 2015).

Generally speaking, 'submission' refers to giving up power in the hands of the Dominant(s) and requires a full devotion and trust placed in the dominating partner(s); the 'submissive' is the person relinquishing the power. There is a difference between being a sub and being a bottom, a slave or a masochist (they might be used interchangeably in certain contexts and one person can be all three, but one must be careful when conflating the terms), as being a sub requires the participation in a very specific dynamic that works due to the sub's and

Dom's complete devotion to one another. According to most BDSM glossaries and from the answers I have received during my fieldwork, submission often refers to the act of relinquishing power not just within the play context but in life as well, where the sub can either give up all of themselves or certain aspects of their lives to the Dom/me (jamirodman glossary, n.d). A Master/slave relationship is quite similar, but it takes the dynamics to more extreme levels. On the other hand, a bottom (and the corresponding top) only refers to someone who accepts to be dominated in a specific play scene; they might not be submissive at all and can be the tops and Doms in other contexts (BDSMcafe, n.d).

Who exactly 'has' the power in a D/s relationship, is a contested issue. In the literature the idea that the sub is, in fact, the one in control and the Dom/me is there to meet the sub's needs, has been pushed forward on occasions (Khan, 2018; Rivoli, 2015; Zussman and Pierce, 1998). Jackson (2016: 256) argues that: 'This is due to the fact that the submissives are the ones who set the boundaries of the game. They allow the Doms to do what they please to a certain extent. The dom can only go as far as the submissive allows.' Herbert and Weaver (2015) have similarly contested that while both Doms and subs have power, albeit differently exercised, it is more likely that the sub is the one in control because they set the limits.

However, in the online spaces Dom/mes have been cautioning against this idea as realistically the sub cannot be in control as then the whole thing becomes paradoxical and redundant, which would be discussed in depth in later sections. The idea of the sub being the real power holder can work well when explaining female submission in order to 'marry' feminism with BDSM, which this thesis argues, has more to do with finding acceptable excuses for participating in a D/s dynamic than with reality. For example, a popular BDSM-oriented website that provides information on BDSM dynamics for the general population and more advanced education is contesting this.

It is a common opinion that the BDSM submission and empowerment are mutually exclusive and can't even exist in the same sentence, mostly due to some misconceptions regarding the BDSM subculture in general. Strong and independent females who have submissive tendencies, on the other hand, are particularly hard to reconcile their BDSM and everyday lives since they are facing this pressure that feminists can only be dominatrices and nothing else. Guys are quite safe though!

Further, an idea of submissive woman usually wakes up the disgust in vanilla feminists who believe that sexual liberation would be – for those who are into it, of course – best embodied in a Femdom relationship. (BDSMcafe, n.d.)

The idea that the sub is the one in control makes the dynamic more easily abet. However, as seen by the data examples above, D/s dynamic within BDSM is strictly contextual, and does not reflect a real-life power dynamic. That is, within BDSM one cannot have power altogether, as it goes against the general idea of BDSM as discussed at length in the academic literature – everyone can consent and withdraw their consent at any point thus maintaining autonomy. For example:

Others say the bottom is in ultimate control as they have a safe word to put a stop to any scene when they like. I don't get this logic because the Top/Dom also has the ability to end the scene whenever they want. So how does that mean the bottom has "ultimate" control when it takes both of them to consent in order to make a scene happen? (Online fieldwork, BDSM forum, October, 2020).

This comment is interesting as it succinctly outlines the issues surrounding the narrative of ‘topping from the bottom’. It essentially problematically erodes all parties' ability to consent and is also a paradox – who is actually in power? How can a sub have all the power considering the point of subbing is to experience lack of control and the loss of power? Lindemann (2011) has thoroughly documented the gendered issues surrounding the ‘topping from the bottom’ dynamic in terms of dominatrix/submissive men. This narrative risks engendering the fluidity of the dynamic, especially when payment is involved, as this can make pro – Domes bow to their submissives’ requests and demands thus positioning the sub in a more rigid power system which they can uphold. Echoing Lindemann’s observation, dominant women have expressed worries that often submissive men do not respect the negotiated power exchange and demand Domes to perform activities they might not be comfortable with. As a result, submissive people aiming for the ‘topping from the bottom’ angle can find themselves ostracised when the other partner has not agreed to the dynamic. As this data extract discusses:

A question for fellow Domes - I'm sure most of us have dealt/are still dealing with men who pretend to be subs/potential clients only to go on to violate our limits and

demand we "prove" that we are a "REAL Domme" by doing what THEY want us to do. And if we are smart enough not to entertain them, they proceed to discredit us, often straight up insult us, or better yet, threaten us with violence. Even though we are aware that these are misogynists who get a kick out of antagonising and abusing women in positions of power, it can still often feel very emotionally draining and upsetting. How do you care for yourself and lift your spirits back up after such an exhausting interaction? Do you ever get into the "Why me/Is there something wrong with ME/Am I not good enough" headspace? If so, how do you get out of it? [Online fieldwork, BDSM forum, August 2020]

The 'topping from the bottom' aspect can seem to be empowering for the subs and showing that D/s roleplay need not sound scary considering the negative connotations the word 'Dom' carries and therefore the dynamic between the sub and the Dom seems positive, which is something Jackson (2016) touches upon. Yet, this misses the sinister aspects that Lindemann (2011) has brought forward, as well as many Dominatrixes in the online sphere – if submissives hold the power and this is normalised, unfortunately it might mean that men can use submission and still perform more traditional masculinities, thus creating unequal power balance. BDSM is not about keeping and exercising power but exchange it between equals (Williams et al, 2016)

Of course, as already mentioned, D/s dynamics are very complicated, and it is entirely possible for topping from the bottom to be taking place as a mutual kink between the Dom and their sub; subs like this are usually referred to as 'brats' and some people also have domination kinks (BDSM glossary, n.d.) While the idea of the sub being the one in control, has been presented in the scholarship and analysed (e.g. Lindemann, 2011) the way submission can be framed in order to support notions of masculinities has not been paid attention to.

Often, the word 'submission' can be used in a stereotypically masculinist frameworks such as submission being a sign of strength because only a really strong man can admit his submissiveness. For example,

In our culture the words surrender, submit, obey/obedience, can infer giving up. Kink allows us to examine our beliefs [...] It takes great strength, courage and character to

surrender, submit, and obey a power greater than myself. (Online fieldwork, BDSM forum, August 2020).

Not only is submission being presented in terms of masculine ideals, but often the ideal submissive person is described as someone who is devoted, obeying and disciplined, yet strong, challenging and not a useless doormat.

'Being submissive doesn't mean being someone's doormat. It doesn't mean you are weak. It means you are strong enough to know your desires, strong enough to let go of the control. Being submissive isn't easy and it isn't for the weak.' Author Unknown. (Online fieldwork, BDSM forum, August, 2020).

Men who happen to be submissive can admit their BDSM identity by framing submission in these stereotypically patriarchal notions of masculinities, yet still admit they are more than happy to be submitted by a strong Dom/me. It can be argued that this phenomenon is subverting and actively ascribing to ideals of typical masculinities. This can be examined through some aspects of the hybrid masculinities theory, discussed earlier in the chapter. In the discussion below, I am drawing upon Greenbaum and Dexter (2018) who examine veganism and masculinities, and Randles (2018) who theorizes modern day fatherhood ideals.

For example, through the absence of meat consumption and animal killing/hunting, men can renegotiate and challenge the ideals of patriarchal masculinities and seemingly pose a threat to them by attacking stereotypical notions of what it is to be a man (Greenbaum and Dexter, 2018). In this case, veganism dismisses toxic notions of masculinities and contests the narrow hegemonic masculinity types and ideals. Yet, according to Greenbaum and Dexter there is not an actual challenge towards the status quo but instead it is being reinforced:

James rejects the slogan that 'real men eat meat', believing instead that possessing strong values and sticking up for others and 'being a hero' for a cause is masculine. He incorporates a variation of the traditionally feminine trait of compassion into his view of masculinity, shaped by veganism. In these instances, compassion did not challenge their masculine identity; it reinforced it. Identifying as vegan and standing

up for what they believe, despite the stigma, was a sign of strength, confidence and masculinity (2018: 642).

According to Randles (2018) while ideas of hybrid fatherhood employed by American government organizations can be read as helping young fathers to connect to their families and children in a new way of performing masculinities, the hybridization of the practice does little to ensure equality within the families and does not challenge patriarchal relations. This 'hybrid fatherhood' can recreate and enforce hierarchy within masculinities with slogans such as 'man up', 'be a real man and take care of your family'. Therefore, consequently placing certain men on higher social levels and emasculating those who do not perform fatherhood as well, with assumptions that they are failing their families and gender (Randles, 2018). Furthermore, '[a]s a political discourse, it mobilizes norms of masculinity and fathering that have been associated with white, class-privileged, married men for decades' (2018: 535) thus failing men of colour and men from marginalized backgrounds.

This can be read as similar to how submission can be framed to align it with ideals of masculinities for submissive men and to excuse submissive women who, otherwise, might be labelled as non-feminist and participating in their own oppression. The fact that submission can be labelled as something that only a 'really strong' person can perform and as a rebellion against society, brings forward binary division between strength and weakness, with strength still being venerated (masculinity in classic terms) while the weakness is juxtaposed as a strong negative (femininity in classic terms) (Berggren, 2014). It remains a mystery, though, where people who genuinely want to perform stereotypical submission and act 'like doormats' are being placed, considering some of the issues that might arise when overly submissive and co-dependent people are going into D/s dynamics.

I find it absolutely revolting when I meet men who are not submissive, but are worse....they are doormats being set up for abuse, far too many times have I seen submissive be mistakenly seen as weak, helpless, and pathetic. I find it useless and certainly a turnoff to be around. [T]hen again- I find it tragic when someone can be so mistaken. [M]y question is for Femdoms..... what do you do if you encounter a man who thinks he should be weak and helpless to [acquire] your love? [W]ould you correct him, or take him for everything he's got? [W]ould you spend the time and energy correcting his mindset, or would you turn him away? [W]ould you refer him to

something useful or a friend that could use a one-nighter? (Online forum, October 2020).

Here something else might be at play, which cannot be explained with hybrid masculinities. An overly dependent submissive or one who wants to be controlled by their Dom/me at all times can be an unfeasible and morally problematic dynamic, which the aforementioned example shows. In cases like this it is difficult for the Dom/me to assess the situation properly. In order for people to participate into BDSM dynamics, they must be able to consent, assess the risks and be of sound mind, otherwise the consent can be compromised; the so-called SSC (Safe, Sane, Consensual) and RACK (Risk Aware Consensual Kink) awareness (Williams et al, 2016). Often, Dom/mes and Masters/Mistresses cannot be certain whether an overly dependent and 'needy' sub should be entering a D/s dynamic as they might be in need of help or an alternative relationship that does not involve 'extreme' sexual and erotic activities. As such, it will not be entirely correct to assume that submission is a prime example of hybrid masculinities, as the idea behind 'submission as a sign of strength' can be rooted more deeply into the idea that it is amoral for BDSMers to enter relationships with people who might not be able to consent and are in need of an alternative emotional support.

Going back to the hybrid masculinity theory, while beneficial to give us an overview and understanding of BDSM's possible structural oppressions that can occur and how men can incorporate different gender aspects in order to uphold patriarchy, a major flaw and shortcoming of this theory is its inherent view of masculinities belonging to 'men' and 'male bodies' and masculinities as automatic to men (Berggren, 2014). This is something Berggren (2014) and Seidler (2006a; 2006b) have been criticising when it comes to theories in masculinity studies. As such, hybrid masculinities can 'pigeonhole' men, masculinities, as well as the submission practices. As Berggren argues:

The post-structuralist model— as illustrated in Stoltenberg's writing—gives us the discursive dimension: there is a cultural attribution of masculinity to bodies read as "men." However, discourses are always contested and permanently unstable, and there is a conflict with a more egalitarian discourse. None of these discourses can manage to fix meaning completely, but a politically conscious subject should strive to refuse the positioning offered by the "manhood" discourse, and the implied actions.

In contrast, a phenomenological account of masculinity centers on the bodily dimension. For Seidler, there can be no automatic incorporation of masculinity by men. Instead, there is a history of experiences of living with and acquiring masculinity. (2014: 245)

Drawing upon Sara Ahmed (2006), Berggren posits that it is possible to have it both ways and not have to choose between discourses, power, bodies, emotions and lived experiences but making masculinities 'sticky'. This would mean that bodies who are read as 'men' might be oriented towards traditional masculine values like strength and toughness, but this is far from what masculinities are at all times thus being 'able to pull together an understanding of the experiences of boys and men with a firm critique of their oppressive practices.' (2014: 246). If we follow the 'stickiness', then we can see that the way 'submission' can be framed can also be understood as men gravitating towards notions of strength and courage but the discourses and motivations of the men performing submissions are different and mobile.

In fact, practitioners can challenge inherent views on masculinities as something men perform and use to oppress. For example,

I think blanket statements like that are damaging because it provides people with an excuse that this is "normal" this is "expected" so people don't have any reason to check themselves and be better than that. Boys will be boys" "All men are pigs" "Men can't control themselves" etc. just furthers a narrative that men don't have to be held accountable for their actions and you simply just shouldn't expect better from them. Men who don't fall into those blanket stereotypes feel offended, but men who do feel validated. And that's the problem. (Online fieldwork, BDSM forum, October 2020)

The commentator here argues against the use of essentialism, especially in relation to masculinities. This essentialism at first glance might seem like a valid criticism at male violence or abuse but at the end it serves to enforce it – it actually denies male agency in the same gendered violence it criticises. In other words, if we accept as truth that men can't control themselves, this means that they can never change, it is in their nature thus we cannot really criticise them for something they cannot change; the agency is gone. This instead strengthens patriarchy, as men avoid blame but retain power. These stereotypes are inherent from the patriarchal gender roles – men being aggressive, strong, sexual, scary etc.

(Saguy et al, 2021; Ólafsdóttir and Kjaran, 2019). Then these stereotypes are repackaged as some form of feminist criticism against men, but it is not a productive criticism. Criticising the notions of 'boys will be boys', 'men always want to fuck' etc., is not to deny men's culpability in enforcing patriarchy and gendered abuse but it does serve to avoid gendered essentialism and to hold men accountable.

Furthermore, framing men and masculinities in this way, does and will affect the relationship with others; people do not exist in isolation of one another.

"Men are much more likely to lower their standards to [anything] alive when they're horny." Except they don't despite the stereotype that they will, as evidenced by every woman whose ever been rejected for sex. It's not just harmful to men because it's a false narrative that men feel they have [to] pretend is true in order to be accepted as a "proper red blooded male" but it's harmful to the women who get rejected after being constantly fed this idea that men are so horny they'll fuck any woman who offers. They're left feeling really shitty about themselves because something must be really wrong with them then right? No, I don't think we should continue to feed that narrative. (Online extract, October, 2020)

People recognise the variability of the notion of being a man as not something that naturally happens to people. Often masculinities are treated as something that all men possess thus dangerously leading to a slippery slope where men might not be held responsible for their actions, which is reminiscent of Waling's (2019a) arguments, presented earlier in the chapter.

So far, I have presented some of the theoretical backgrounds that can be used to explain and frame submission and masculinities. It is clear that it is challenging and almost impossible to fit masculinities in neat categories that then can also be used to explain the submission practices of men. Instead, I wanted to bring forth the focus on the 'messiness' and 'stickiness' of masculinities and show that a single phenomenon, such as submission, can be explained differently depending on the context and people participating. In this case, drawing upon Waling (2019b; 2019a), employing feminism to study masculinities would mean that we need to engage and explore how men experience practices of masculinities through subjectivity and context. Through this, we can see in new ways how contemporary

masculinities are experienced by men and are shaping the BDSM roles as well. In the next section, I would like to explore certain types of Dominance practices in more depth, namely the Alpha Male Dom.

4.2.3. 'Jupiter in Furs': Dominant masculinities, fantasies and desiring the neoliberal dominant Alpha – Male

When it comes to dominant performances within BDSM, it would be difficult to encompass all of them, from my in person and online fieldwork, this thesis argues that there are many ways of being a Dom/me. The more popular ones are Sensual Dom/mes, Sadistic Dom/mes, Masters and Alpha – Male Dominants who in turn can be (not an exclusive list) riggers (rope players), sadists, masochists (yes, dominants can be masochists albeit rarely), brat tamers (dominants who specifically pair themselves with brats) or all the above (BDSM glossary). Now it is widely accepted within BDSM and in the literature that the roles of Dominance (and retrospectively submission) are not necessarily gendered (Newmahr, 2011; Califia, 2000; Childs, 2016) and there is a large dose of role fluidity; that is Dominance is not reserved for men who ascribe to heterosexual traditional masculinities and can be performed by anyone (Martinez, 2018). The aspirations for role fluidity and transcending the mainstream ideals of what it is to be a 'man' can be illustrated with the following data example:

A lot of this seems to revolve around the question of what it is to be a man. I'm not saying I know, only that I'm a lot less worried about it than I used to be. Men in our culture get stereotyped as decisive, confident, clear, brave, physically strong - not bad things. We're also "supposed" to swagger, be in charge, and be prone to belching and knuckle-dragging. How do those stereotypes square with male submission, when those qualities are easier associated with male dominance? It's mistaken to equate dominance with masculinity. Maybe we do it because we think we see it so often, but if male subs and Doms can share some of these masculine qualities, it's a reminder that the qualities themselves are not what makes one dominant or submissive. Dominance and submission must come from a different

place. Afterall, women are also Domes (thankfully!) (Online fieldwork, BDSM Forum, October 2020).

Yet, as Martinez (2018) also observed, the societal binary division is often present within BDSM, with more men performing strict Dominance while more women tend to be submissive and/or switches. While Martinez acknowledges that her quantitative data should not be seen as representative of the whole of BDSM and that qualitative studies tend to describe more role fluidity within the groups they have been studying, I would tend to agree with her assessment that often BDSM participants can be performing heterosexual, binary scripts with corresponding BDSM roles. Based on the physical fieldwork performed for this study, I met a high number of male Doms paired with female submissives. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the women tended to be more fluid in BDSM and sexual terms and were encouraged to play and/or dominate other women by their male Doms. Regardless, data on who performs dominance and submission and how many of those performing dominance are men, would never be representative of the whole of BDSM and there are many limitations.

My physical fieldwork was not very long due to Covid – 19 restrictions and as such I was only able to visit predominantly heterosexual BDSM events. Only once I visited an LGBTQI+ oriented event where there was an abundance of people in various BDSM roles – Dominatrixes and their male subs, sissy boiiiis and their Masters, and various switches. Bauer's study (2017), conducted among LGBTQI+ BDSM participants, reported similar higher levels of role fluidity among the players. Childs (2016) discusses that the masculine performances in his sample among gay men in S/M leather clubs as both 'fixed and fluid' (p: 1325) in that the men were adopting various aspects of hyper – masculinities in their plays regardless of whether they were Doms or subs. Thus, Childs argues, hyper – masculinity was not just reserved for the Doms but for the bottoming players as well, therefore the masculinities performed were very mobile and transcending Dom/sub dichotomy. Furthermore, knowledge on whether dominance is performed by men mostly is further skewed since many people perform BDSM behind closed doors and not at sex parties; even BDSM parties can be very exclusive, thus limiting the number of participants as well as the access to researchers (Frank, 2015), which was discussed in Chapter 2 Methodology.

Considering this, one might in fact argue that dominance within BDSM is very varied and accessible to all, regardless of background and gender identity. In this section, the focus will be on male Doms and I will not be covering Dominatrixes because while everyone can be a dominant, men and women would be experiencing and constructing different dominant realities. Women (both cis and trans) who perform topping and Dominant/Master roles can unfortunately be subjected to trans/misogyny and their roles as Domes can be challenged by male subs, especially when it comes to subs who are paying for the services (Lindemann, 2011), something that was touched upon in the previous section.

On the other hand, both cis and trans men who are Doms are much less likely to be questioned on their performances. However, trans Dominant men can also be challenged, especially on non – BDSM oriented dating sites. The following data example discusses this:

There's not a whole lot I can add here, you summed it up pretty well. I think it's absolutely the association of pussy=submission. And FTM [female – to – male] porn, as sparse as that is, pretty much only shows transmen bottoming. (Let's not even mention the comments on a lot of these... "wait she wants to be fucked but she's a man??" it's beyond aggravating). There's also this 'novelty' of fucking a boy with a pussy, and this idea that transmen are just glorified tomboys, ugh I feel transwomen are also subjected to the idea of "you must be a bottom." It could very well be these men placing themselves on a pedestal as the only ones who can top, ever. Now, when I was on Grindr, I was a sub only and I got lots of attention. Interestingly enough, when I posted an ad expressing interest in topping here, I also got lots of attention, so that may also express a rift between non-kinkster Grindr men versus the more kinky understanding of who can top here. That doesn't mean I haven't gotten my fill of chasers...thankfully those messages have more or less stopped. (Online fieldwork, BDSM forum, August 2020)

The fieldwork example here touches upon some of the issues that trans men might be experiencing and will draw upon Rogers (2020) and Abelson (2016). When it comes to trans masculinities, trans men 'become part of the flawed system that expects and rewards dominance' (Rogers, 2020: 6). Abelson's (2016) research into trans masculinities in the US Southern rural communities, posits that that in order for trans men to be accepted, they need to demonstrate 'sameness'. This would mean that often these young men need to

ascribe to the 'strong, white, manly, Christian, heterosexual' masculinities of the South to avoid ostracising (Abelson, 2016). Going back to the above extract, there is a difference between how this man was perceived on Grindr (a generally non – kink dating platform) and on the BDSM dating platforms. On Grindr their 'topping' was challenged, and they were seen as a 'tomboy' and a 'boy with a vagina' evoking Rogers' (2020) and Abelson's (2016) arguments on trans masculinity and sameness; yet, on the kink-oriented platforms, their masculinity and ability to top was challenged significantly less. In accordance with Bauer (2016), within BDSM masculinities and trans masculinities can be understood in much more playful, temporary and erotic ways thus challenging the reproduction of inherent dichotomies between male/female. While transphobia, misogyny as well as misunderstandings of gender do happen among BDSM people and kinksters (see following Chapter 5), the way genders are viewed is in a more layered, and much less rigid way, as this BDSM practitioner explains:

Although there is no shortage of kinksters on Grindr, it's not really geared to BDSM [...], so your profile is mostly being seen by people who will struggle to understand concepts like Dom and sub. Terms we think are basic because they are part of our world are actually niche. The way Top/bottom is defined in gay terms (penetrator/penetrated) is not the same as the way we use the terms in kink (doer/receiver of action)... so quite a lot of what you are dealing with is coming from that. We can think that that's rudimentary, that they need to have their minds opened, that it plays on heterosexual stereotypes, whatever... but it is what it is.
(Online fieldwork, BDSM forum, October 2020).

Here we see that 'dominance' and 'masculinities' are not understood in classical binary terms (the idea of the one who dominates also penetrates thus evoking heteronormative views on masculine/feminine) and BDSM does challenge that, since gender, as well as Dom/sub dynamics and sexual acts are understood in contrast with the mainstream binary heterosexual ideals. This echoes Karioris and Allan (2017) who criticize the literature's obsession on sex and masculinities with penetrative 'heterosex'. As their posit, often sex is seen as penetrative and reliant on a penis, thus 'phallogentric' which then leads to sex acts being understood through this phallogentricism and penetration (as in the case with the Grindr men). For Karioris and Allan (ibid.). S/M and BDSM challenge this where sex and

being sexual does not necessarily involve genitals; in fact, the whole body can be erogenous. As evidenced above, BDSMers would have a different understanding of the acts of Domination/submission that should not be equated with phallogentric ideas and leading to penis – in – vagina sexual acts. This disassociates dominance and masculinity, leading to more contingent ways of understanding masculine and gendered practices.

While the understanding of BDSM roles being on a spectrum, as well as sexual acts and gender roles is growing, there can be a hierarchy within BDSM between men, and specifically between dominant men that can be brought into how masculinities can be understood and performed. A popular and active online blog written by a sensual Dom, Alpha – Dom*, has been selected to trace how masculine and dominant performances can be used to show control not over women but other men, thus making the Dom in question desired by the women. The male competition is vivid here:

*Domination is not about seizing control from women, it's about the seduction of women's minds whereby women want to eagerly give you control of their bodies to fulfill deep, secret sexual desires, that they have had all their lives to be controlled and devoured by a "Bad Man"[...] They are also drawn to my alpha male power over other men to lead them or intimidate them [...] Most men cannot handle being with a woman like that. They either feel inadequate as men or they feel uncomfortable never being the center of attention. It takes real confidence as a man to be with an Alpha Female [...] Secondly, society & feminism has robbed many men of their natural baser instincts. Being a good husband/father by society's standards has feminized many men into minivan driving, cargo shorts wearing drones of suburbia. So for a Alpha submissive to find a man who is very self-confident and encouraging/supporting of her career while being sexually Dominant in the bedroom is no simple task. (Online blog extract, *DominantSoul*, October, 2020).*

The masculinity in question here reads similarly to a traditional script of performing masculinity and as something intrinsic that men are being robbed from – however, in a way, it is not overtly sexist and it claims to make sure that women get what they want and under their own accord; this masculinity is repackaged, rebranded and put on the market as a neoliberal capitalist dream (Walker and Roberts, 2017; Salzinger, 2016). Under the neoliberal capitalism, Walker and Roberts write (2017:1), '[t]he spirit of competition, so

celebrated in and central to this economic-cum-political formulation, extends to individuals, who become simultaneously the repositories and drivers of state goals', while also accusing the less economically privileged and 'weaker' individuals as responsible for their own miserable lives. BDSM, playing into the neoliberal economies, has been largely addressed as such (Weiss, 2006; 2008; Khan, 2018; Musser, 2015; Han, 2016). Weiss (2008) observed that the BDSM scene has been rebranded in neoliberal terms playing with the ideas of BDSM practitioners as well adjusted, working, family people who have the rights to perform their sexual activities and are juxtaposed to the 'antisocial Other - perverts' and the less privileged. Han (2016: 38) writes that '[t]he hierarchies of displays of fetishistic attire are then representative of social and sexual capital based on the norms in the scene that dictate what is 'sexy' (and therefore 'better') and what is not' thus enforcing hierarchy in the BDSM community.

The fieldwork suggests that BDSM can be expensive and require lots of capital; a successful Dom would know this. After attending a popular UK fetish market a few times, I was taken aback by many of the prices of both clothing and gear. The Alpha – Dom's writing on his blog, does take this into account. Going through the list of rules he has for his submissive partner, expensive toys and pampering were a must that he would provide.

Whenever BabyGirl masturbates, she must first insert a butt plug in her ass, insert Ben Wa balls into her pussy and wear nipples clamps (with bells) on her breasts. (All sex toys provided by Master) [...] Within 72 hours before BabyGirl will see Master, she will go to the spa for a facial, mani/pedi, massage and waxing. (All expenses covered by Master). (Online blog extract, DominantSoul, October 2020).

Ownership jewellerys, beautiful clothes and multiple sex toys were also listed as part of the mutual obligations, which also echoes compensated dating found in cultures across the world (Swader and Vorobeva, 2015). Not many men would be able to keep up with this lifestyle. As Han (2016) argues, having the right toys and the right kits was seen as essential among their participants in the London fetish scene. Yet, while I discovered similar sentiments and level of classism, many of my participants were working with whatever they could afford. Practitioners were finding ways of navigating through financial issues and gaining 'cultural' capital due to their inventiveness instead.

The shiny, packaged masculinity of Alpha – Dom, is reminiscent of Weiss' (2008) observation of the healthy, neoliberal BDSM ideals. Instead of performing 'sleazy', hyper – sexual and pervy masculinity that employs casual sex, there is the emotional, bonding and monogamous relationship being elevated on a pedestal.

As a single, unattached Dom male I honestly want an exclusive, committed long-term relationship with ONE incredibly special woman [...] To be clear, I am not claiming to be some choir boy. I have sowed my fair share of wild oats. It was a phase of my life when the thrill of new conquests and wild sexual adventures were my focus. I don't regret that phase in my life because it gave the opportunity to experience the love of many amazing women [...] I am not saying everyone should have exclusive relationships. In fact, I believe there are phases in life when having meaningless sex with various partners for a time helps heal emotional wounds. I have watched many friends "fuck their way back to being whole and emotionally available" after an ugly, painful divorce. Unfortunately, some people never quite leave this phase and remain emotionally unavailable for years. (Online blog extract, DominantSoul, October 2020).

Here the monogamous relationship is seen as fulfilling, healthy and healing. While the casual way of looking at sex and relationships is not downright disavowed, it is framed as 'immature', as something that one might undergo if they are young, but it cannot last. For Armstrong, Hamilton and England (2010) committed and long-term relationships are not necessarily more beneficial or emotionally fulfilling than casual sex and 'hooking up'; as evidenced by their research, relationships can be more emotionally draining and challenging than casual hook-ups. The idea of the 'tall, dark and handsome' man who separates himself from the masses, has the financial security, good job and is there to worship, take care and give everything he has to the woman of his life, is a popular narrative fed to us through cultural media and famous BDSM fiction works employ this often (Khan, 2018; Musser, 2015). Even when toxic, such a relationship and masculine ideals are still elevated in stark contrast to people that might be regarded as 'proper perverts' (Khan, 2018).

Finally, the masculinity of the Alpha – Dom is marketable and desired. It is a brand that can be sold to the consumers – women. The majority of the followers and commentators on the blog are in fact women, submissive ones, where they overwhelmingly lust after the perfect,

caring Dom. The occasional ones who challenged his ideas as 'sexist' were talked down to, ignored or called uneducated. On one hand, the data here challenges the notion of 'men the consumer' where female bodies are the 'consumed' under patriarchy and capitalism (Smith, 2013).

On the other hand, the ideals presented are pretty much the strong, sexy male provider. Yet, looking at this dominant style of masculinity through one specific 'hole' will not be fair. Is this dominance created by, under and through patriarchy? As Scott (2015: 64) argues,

Although the character of Christian Grey has been highlighted as cause for concern, again by feminists who feel his behavior outside the bedroom is borderline stalker-ish at times, there is significant evidence to suggest that he is a character not created by a male conspiracy to render women submissive, but rather a melding together of female desires to have a man who is ridiculously rich and successful at a young age, good looking, meticulously organized, and adventurous in the bedroom [...] If the female sub/male dom pairing really is such a patriarchal fantasy, then why is it women who were seeking out erotic literature with this theme in their droves, but not men? A quick look at the back cover of one of the many copycat erotic novels that emerged in 2012, *This Man* by Jodi Ellen Malpas, doesn't exactly sound like it's describing a male fantasy with its "devastatingly handsome, utterly confident, pleasureseeking playboy who knows no boundaries."

Similarly with the way Scott discusses Christian Grey's image, the Alpha Dom here might also be read as problematic in the sense that he in a way upholds certain patriarchal order (mansplaining femininity and female submission and saying how much greater he is than other men). However, ultimately there is nothing inherently wrong with the way the dominant blog is being written. It is an erotic, BDSM, kinky blog and as such contains exactly this – sexy, kinky masculinity for female pleasure. Sure, it seems he revels in the female desire, but he also provides what some submissive women want to hear. This is just one of the many ways being a Dominant, the *Alpha Dominance*, and since it is 'Alpha', there would be an experience of masculine competition. And while this does seem like a contemporary neoliberal masculinity that not many dominant men would be able to recreate, it is fine – there are many other ways to be a Dom. This thesis argues that at the end, this is an

extravagant internet fantasy about a well-off, older, sexy Dom pleasuring his chosen submissive woman and there is nothing wrong with this fantasy.

Similarly, to the way submission is negotiated within BDSM, Dominance is very context depending and men can find different ways of being a Dom. The focus here fell on the 'Alpha Dominance', which is a very specific style of Domination, that blends together neoliberal ideals with erotic fantasies that can be very appealing. At the same time the masculinity here can be interpreted in different ways and it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what the performance is – on one hand it plays into the patriarchal capital order, but on the other, it can also challenge it thus contributing once more to the feminist subjectivity covered earlier in the chapter.

4. 2. 4. Cuckolds and hierarchy – fetishization of masculinities

Finally I would like to pay attention to the very niche 'cuckold play'. As my research discovered, we can see that the adherence to some values from mainstream society, such as hierarchical gender aspects, can also be present within the scene. Genders within certain BDSM facets can also be positioned hierarchically in order for the fetish and role plays to work thus providing strict structures. This 'Gender hierarchy' can become important, and especially masculinity hierarchy might be enforced within BDSM not just simply because of hegemonic ideals and structures of masculinities taking place in the purest sense, but due to kinkiness.

Here in this specific example, where a couple enjoys cuckolding – that is, the woman indulges in sexual and BDSM plays with another man or men (the 'Bull/s'), that are not her partner (the 'cuckold'), cuckolding was understood through the need to enforce gender hierarchy and fetishize it. As the original poster put it,

'I soon found, however, that most of the guys who messaged me want to be made to feel like they are "less of a man" than my man. And I...well, I don't think of gender that way. I see it as a spectrum, sure, but not a hierarchy.' (online fieldwork, BDSM forum, June 2020).

This cuckold play in this scenarios is different from the stereotypical cuckold scenario where the husband wants to see his wife playing and having sex with other men in order to be humiliated (Lehmiller, 2020). Here the cuckold is the submissive man who is the outsider and he wants to be humiliated by his mistress' husband; he is the one entering within the couple's space and the humiliation is enforced by the couple who are put onto a higher hierarchical level. As another member discussed the situation:

'I'm not sure it's helpful to view it from a gender perspective, because it seems like something else is going on.. the humiliation is the interesting bit. [...] I think of the various "gender" identities, such as "masculinity" as having its own hierarchy (running vertically). Within the masculine gender, you can have those that assume very dominate roles and those that assume very submissive roles. Same for all the other genders. With that said, you are free reject the premise that there is a hierarchy within the masculine gender, but your world view is not the same as the typical cuckold who do see a hierarchy. What you are seeing is men with humiliation kinks, these men place themselves on a spectrum of masculinity, with the "Bull" at the top of the hierarchy and the "cuckold" on the bottom. Sandwiched somewhere in between is their Domme/Mistress who uses the Bull as a means to humiliate the sub-cuckold. For these guys (those messaging you) there is a very definite hierarchy.'

(online fieldwork, BDSM forum, June 2020)

It can be argued that the cuckold here does not view the Domme as the real dominant – she has to use the 'Bull' who through his masculinity and dominance can put down the cuck. The humiliation happens by the Bull emasculating the sub cuckold who then achieves the humiliation pleasure. Without the clear hierarchy, the fetish cannot be possible. Here we can see that it is possible that BDSM messes with the roles found in hetero eroticism in terms of cuckold and hot wife.

Yet, the Bull can also be read as the 'instrument' that the Domme uses to humiliate and provide sexual satisfaction for the sub and consequently for herself. The masculinities here can be interpreted in terms of fetishism. While the word 'fetish' has a long and complicated anthropological history, deeply rooted into the colonial prejudice of the discipline (Logan, 2009) here I am employing the term in strictly sexual and BDSM connotations; in this aspect a fetish is an object and/or a symbolic and abstract idea, providing sexual arousal and satisfaction (Rees and Garcia, 2017). Within feminism, fetishism has been discussed

frequently, in relation to how femininities are treated, as well as women and their bodies, especially women of colour, as objects for the male gaze and sexual gratification (Woan, 2007). The aforementioned cuckold play can challenge that, by providing way for masculinities to be sexualized, fetishized and turned into something playful and instrumental for someone's sexual desire.

Masculinities stereotypically have often been referred to in terms of strength and stoicism, as something serious and powerful (Martin, 2016) yet we can see how within this context BDSM allows for the masculinities to transcend these stereotypical notions and be turned into something to be played with, thus stripping the power away. As another member, noted:

Not all people get pleasure out of sex the same way. I can never fuck a cuck but still see him as a sexual object because he's allowing me to have sex with other people though. That makes him a sexually charged entity [in my opinion]. Even if me and him aren't having sex. He's still the getaway to the type of sex that I want. Meaning I see cuckold in a sexual way. Even if me and him never have sex. (Online extract, August, 2020).

Here we can see how the masculinity of the cuck and the cuck himself are instrumental for the Domme's desires and highly sexualized. Furthermore, the scenario outlined above, as already noted, is different than the typical cuckold scenario where the husband is the one who is humiliated, and his masculinity questioned as part of the fetish while the Bull (the 'outsider' sleeping with the wife) is the one exhibiting stereotypical masculinity and sexual prowess. Here, where the roles are reversed the Bull's (husband) and the cuckold's masculinities are in a way intertwined and thus both become questioned and fetishized. The Domme is the one using her husband to enact the sexual humiliation over the cuckold, yet the husband is also humiliated since his wife is still playing with 'the other' man. While it can be interpreted that there is a strict hierarchy coming at play here, my research found that the the hierarchy is playfully eroticised here; it is not real as neither the Bull nor the cuckold are entirely powerless or powerful as they are the components of a whole circular system with the Domme at the centre.

The cuckolding within BDSM can show us how subjective masculinities and BDSM identities are and cannot be explained through rigid masculinity types. Yet, there are different ways of performing 'cuckoldry' and the gender performances can be different. With the examples I provided we can see a very contextual glimpse at how BDSM complicates the way masculinities are seen and the practice of cuckolding within BDSM has the potential to diminish the rigidity of patriarchal structures that may be stronger.

4. 3. Conclusion

The examples shown through looking at dominance, submission, and cuckoldry (hierarchy play) can aid us into thinking about masculinities in new ways. While stereotypical gender performances can take place, the provided examples fall in line with the theoretical criticism that has been proposed throughout the thesis – the structural rigidity of Connell's (2005) typology usually employed by MMS is limited in that it cannot account for men's living experiences and subjectivities (Waling, 2019a; 2019b, Beasley, 2015; Berggren, 2014). While some of the gender elements surrounding male submission in BDSM can be interpreted through the hybrid masculinities theory, it would be difficult to use this theory to encompass submission as a whole. The issue is that this theory relies too much on the structural theory of hegemonic masculinities and cannot account for the gender fluidness and gender performances within BDSM. My findings do support some of the literature on submission that argues how men can use submission in order to upkeep traditional masculine roles, especially when payment is involved (Lindemann, 2011), however, at the same time submission and masculinities can be interpreted in different ways and showcase the fluidity of gender expression. My analysis is contributing to the existing literature, as well as adding new knowledge since in general, male submission is underrepresented in the academic discourse. In this case, my findings are applicable in the feminist and BDSM scholarship and are complicating the ways we think of masculinities and submission.

Similarly, my findings support the literature on Domination and masculinities, however, studies on the Alpha – Male dominance are also scarce, which is a niche style of Domination. Here one could see how neoliberalism and BDSM can be intertwined (Weiss, 2008; 2006; Han, 2016), yet the masculinity at play here cannot be explained through a

single category. While the Alpha style of domination can upkeep more traditional masculinity and male competitiveness, it can also be read through eroticism, playfulness and service designed for women to consume, which is in opposition to the way masculinities are usually framed.

The discussion on hierarchy fetish and cuckoldry can also give us different glimpses on how masculinities are present in BDSM and how power play and hierarchy can be utilised for erotic and playful purposes, thus stripping away the assumed 'power' that masculinities hold.

Chapter 5

Dirty, Messy, Sexy: Problematizing gender performances through and within the BDSM scene

5. 1. Gender performance: Masculinities at play in the UK and Online BDSM scene

5. 1. 1 Introduction

This chapter aims to outline and critically explore some of the gender expressions and performances within BDSM, following physical and online participant observation fieldwork. It aims to do so by showing examples of BDSM plays in order to see how BDSM performances take place, as well as the accompanied gender performances and the way these performances are usually geared towards coupled bonding (often heteronormative). Here based on my data, I argue that BDSM does break gender binaries and often BDSM role performances such as submission, dominance and switching are not gender dependant which was already discussed in depth in the previous chapter. However, while this is generally true, the scene, as based on my in-person fieldwork, does prioritize couples and often heteronormative bonding, where for example, the majority of submissive people are women paired with Dominant men. Therefore, in this chapter I would like to outline more specifically the 'messiness' of BDSM performances and the understanding of loaded terms such as power, dominance and submission and the way they are understood strictly in BDSM contexts. 'Messiness' here is understood through Noble, who writes:

In other words, philosophical discussions of recognition inadequately deal with the *messiness* of everyday encounters, the plurality of forms of recognition and the practical orientations in social space they allow. Subjectivity is too often reduced to

bounded identity and understood as visual and momentary, which foregrounds a one-dimensional understanding of recognition—as a linear process from the recogniser to the recognised, rather than a dialogical and multi-dimensional process (2009: 879).

In this sense, the notion of ‘messiness’ attempts to recognise that gender, and masculinities, more specifically, are not bounded by preconceived categories that are perfectly structured and easy to follow. Instead, as Noble (2009) points out, we need to consider the fluidity of subjectivity and everyday experiences, which are vital in critically examining how BDSM practices and gender identities operate within the scene.

Secondly, a specific attention is paid to transgender performances within the scene, along with crossdressing practices, in order to show the BDSM community’s attitudes towards trans experiences. While BDSM often is a safe place for the LGBTQI+ community, I came to notice certain friction with the scene when it comes to trans women specifically and also cis men who cross-dress as women as part of their BDSM performances. As such, transphobia is not unheard of and BDSM can be complicit with patriarchal and binary views on gender.

Finally, the chapter discusses how pop culture and the ‘mainstream’ have influenced BDSM and some of the issues the scene faces regarding its transgressive aspirations and compliance with social structures.

This chapter provides some context for how the UK BDSM scene operates and showcases that sometimes gender and relationships can be understood. While we see that there are fluid masculinity representations, we also need to be careful not to overstate this fluidity. Within the BDSM scene, problematic understandings of gender roles can happen, and we need to be aware of this to assess the BDSM scene’s perceptions of gender identities critically.

5. 1. 2. Setting the scene

When discussing the literature and the theoretical background, as well as the BDSM scene overall, it was argued that BDSM has transcended the boundaries of simply kinky sex. As based on the existing research I defined BDSM as a ‘scene’ instead of a ‘subculture’ based

on Pfadenhauer (2005) and Bennett (2011) due to its fluid, symbolic and thematic territory where people can meet, bond and engage in common activities (erotic and non-erotic). For Redhead (1993) and Straw (1991) subculture is too much of a homogenous term that cannot account for the mixing and dissolution of communities, which used to be labelled as subcultures. Due to the destabilization of identities and structures owing to postmodernism, more fluid relationships were starting to take place thus providing the need for new ways of looking at what was once 'subculture' (Bennett and Khan, 2004). Hence, why the term 'scene' has been selected by many scholars (Gaines, 1994; Pfadenhauer, 2005; Gallan, 2012; Grazian, 2013; Straw, 1991) so they can refer to the more contingent ways communities come together and perform activities and identities. This is known as the 'post – subcultural' turn and Straw defines scenes as something that brings people together from various social backgrounds and populations (1991).

While performing the fieldwork, it became obvious that BDSM is indeed 'a scene' and is actively referred to as such by its participants. BDSM, as it has been argued in the literature for quite some time now (Lindemann, 2012; Chare, 2014; Sagarin, Lee and Klement, 2015), is very theatrical, sometimes referred to as a stylised ritual as well. In this case, the word 'scene' makes sense, as it signals the performativity of BDSM; as Lindemann argues (2012), BDSM roles are interpreted through 'theatre' in that they do not necessarily reflect real life attitudes of the practitioners and they should be only interpreted in BDSM context. Hence, 'scene' is one of the more accurate descriptors of BDSM. The theatrical interpretation of BDSM would be discussed in more depth in the following sections.

Furthermore, the data I obtained based on the observations in the physical UK BDSM scene, supports the argument that BDSM needs to be studied in its entirety as a complex 'entity' that is not so much connected to physical sex as it is supposed to offer belonging, community, and friendships. BDSM, furthermore, offers very contingent ways of performing identities and sexual and social activities that are far from homogenous. I believe this further fits the 'scene' definitions given by authors (Bennett, 2016; Straw, 1991). As observed during the data collection period, BDSM events served as spaces for people to meet friends and acquaintances they have known for a while, and it was not a dating space per se. That is, while there were people playing with strangers and trying to meet potential sex partners, this was rare, as most people went into events with their partners or with

people they had negotiated prior to the event. The negotiation of plays was mentioned by some venues, urging visitors to make sure they have partners to play with since it was unlikely they would find someone random. I believe this puts BDSM events in a different position to other sex events which was expressed to me by some of my participants and this will be discussed later on.

All this has been shown in the literature before to an extent (Martinez, 2018; Sloan, 2015), however, the fact that the BDSM events were prioritising bonding and made easier for couples to attend and play with each other has not been documented very well. There were even issues with polyamory and non – monogamous relationships which I will analyse in later sections. I suspect and as suggested this has much to do with the fact that with BDSM it is very important to know the partner you play with very well in order to make sure their needs are met and safety measures are ensured, as BDSM play can be quite risky and dangerous when not done properly. In line with the literature and as it has been argued (Lindemann, 2012) BDSM stops being abuse when it is done by willing, consenting adults who trust each other, know their limits, and have carefully negotiated their plays. Without trust submission/dominant relationships are difficult to maintain and partners need to know each other well (Prior and Williams, 2015). This was observed during the fieldwork and in-depth discussions will be offered in the following sections of the chapter.

As we live in highly digital ages, BDSM is not restricted to physical boundaries only. There is much online space devoted to BDSM that creates a vast online scene that can either be used as a substitute of the physical one or in addition to it. While people tend to visit physical events, many may prefer to abstain from the physical scene due to various reasons ranging between 'it is not the same as before', 'it is dangerous and not very well policed because it is so big now!' to downright fears of physical danger, especially for women. While the digital is currently a big part of the UK BDSM scene, the original scene definition does not include the online and we need to reconfigure this to show how important the online scene of BDSM is. In this sense, the 'scene' definition needs to acknowledge this, as social media and the online sphere play a great role in people's lives, contributing to the fluidity and breaking of barriers, which the original definition argued for. We can see how the term scene becomes even more relevant nowadays and needs to reflect many communities' growing online socialisation (Barna, 2011).

BDSM often has been regarded as a 'serious leisure' and theorised through it (Sprrott and Williams, 2019; Newmahr, 2010; Williams, 2016). As it has become vivid in the past years, scholars tend to study BDSM either as serious leisure or as sexual orientation, with most discourses largely in favour of the former (Sprrott and Williams, 2019). Serious leisure as based on Stebbins' definition 'is deeply satisfying and does offer a full existence [...] it is the steady pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or career volunteer activity that captivates its participants with its complexity and many challenges. It is profound, long-lasting, and invariably based on substantial skill, knowledge, or experience (2001: 54). BDSM has been argued to fit within this definition as it can offer deep belonging, way of life and the possibility for the participants to build their lives around it (Newmahr, 2010; Williams, et al 2016).

While the sexual orientation theory has its own merits, it can go too much into essentialism thus assuming that the BDSM identity someone identifies with is in their 'nature' and they are born with it (Sprrott and Williams, 2019). This becomes problematic when one looks at 'switching', for example (an umbrella term meaning that someone can be a Dom, a sadist, a voyeur, etc, as well as a sub, masochist, exhibitionist; it means that people can move within practices) which can be undermined if BDSM practices are seen as deeply rooted into nature and essentialism. Based on my fieldwork and some of the literature (Sprrott et al, 2021) practitioners also prefer for kink practices and identities to be separate from sexual orientation precisely because kink in BDSM is seen as something extremely varied, multiple and something people can select to explore or not depending on their feelings and desires. It is vivid from this comment selected during my online data collection by a fetlife user, *'[m]aybe kinks are like this as well [sexual orientation] and should not all be thrown into the same pot - some are innate, some learned, some a combination of the two.'* (online excerpt, June 2020).

Furthermore, an important theme emerged here following this. As I came to know from my fieldwork, BDSM practices and kinks more often than not are sex exclusive; that is, sex is in fact not a big factor within kink roleplays making it popular among asexual people as well (Sloan, 2015; Williams et al, 2016), hence why keeping BDSM identities away from sexual subject choice might work best since sex does not play a role all the time.

Based on the themes that emerged from the observations and unstructured field interviews, as well as the online platforms, the subsequent sections will be discussing the various ways men negotiate and perform gender and masculinities more specifically, as well as the practitioners' attitudes towards certain activities and practices. Issues such as belonging, exclusion, acceptance and ways performing sexuality and desire within BDSM would be presented and unpacked.

5. 2. 'Don't torture yourself, darling – this is my job!' BDSM relationships and identities.

The atmosphere was quite intense: a young woman in her underwear was strapped to a chair, with her eyes blindfolded. The man, who was the top, had laid out a table with different 'torture tools' and was circling around 'his victim'. The demo was on psychological interrogation as a BDSM play. The sub let out a little distressed moan and the top kept screwing some torture device into her skin until the moans got stronger. Then he left her and started shouting at her to tell the truth. The woman was crying, promising she would never lie to him. He was making her feel unsafe and uneasy by making noises around her, shouting in her ears and tapping slowly and methodically the back of her chair. The man kept screwing even tighter the device into her skin and she was letting loud moans. He removed her blindfold. Now we could see her face properly. She was genuinely crying, heavy tears falling from her eyes ruining her make up. All of a sudden it felt so real. No one from the audience was moving. I looked around and saw everyone's eyes glued to the young, crying woman strapped in the chair. So beautiful, so fragile. The 'tormentor' kept telling her that if she tells the truth he would let her go and then proceeded to distress her mentally as her cries grew louder (personal fieldwork notes; October, 2019)

The shocking scene made most of the audience quite uncomfortable at first, but it was also extremely captivating – as much as I wanted to avert my gaze at some of the more painful looking moments, I just could not. Did I feel uncomfortable looking at the woman suffering? Yes. Was it because she was a woman? Probably. Would I have been that uncomfortable if it were a young man instead? Maybe, but not to the same extent. I proposed a possible explanation to myself because of the juxtaposition of the two and the power dynamic

unfolding, so close to the one we fear and try to avoid in our everyday lives. The man was tall, well built, dressed in all black and overall, quite menacingly looking; she was half naked, doll-like in appearance and so very distressed. As a woman, I naturally sympathise, and the whole scene evoked the narrative of the 'man the abuser vs woman the victim'. Similarly, Carlström (2017) has reported many of her participants feeling uncomfortable at the sight of women getting 'tortured' during BDSM scenes. However, as she argued, '[s]everal informants similarly emphasise that what distinguishes BDSM from violence-related situations is that BDSM is staged and that participants in BDSM have consented to the activity [...] on one hand, the role-play is a non-reality, a theatrical staging within established boundaries. On the other hand, by agreed boundaries and the confidence that these are respected, space can be created to bring life to the staged situation' (2017: 276).

Once the workshop was over, the Master untied his partner, hugged her for a long time, sat down and cradled her on his lap while gently kissing her forehead and wiping away her tears. I exhaled in relief and looked around noticing that people looked visibly more comfortable and relaxed; some even started joking with their partners. And it dawned on me – it was a performance involving consenting adults and suddenly all felt right, as Carlström (ibid.) also showed. However, the way the word 'performance' is used in BDSM context in this thesis should not be taken in the most straightforward, banal sense. What we saw was not a stage play played by actors, involving simulation; it was a very real encounter. The Master was torturing the Submissive and inflicting real psychological and physical pain; in fact, as we were told, the workshop was highly compressed as the preparation for such role play requires about a day (sometimes even longer). In this case their preparation had started 5 hours prior to when we, the audience, were let in to watch. Nevertheless, despite the 'real factor', BDSM encounters have been referred to as 'plays' and 'theatre-like performances' by researchers and practitioners alike for a long time (Lindemann, 2012; Chare, 2014; Sagarin, Lee and Klement, 2015). As Lindemann writes, '[s]adomasochistic interactions are stylized representations of dominance and submission' (2012: 10). In this sense, the people involved in a play very often are not identifying with the concepts of 'submission and dominance' in real life. When I spoke to a submissive woman about her BDSM lifestyle she chuckled and rolled her eyes as if she had been asked that question million times and replied:

Well, I know it sounds a cliché, but truth is, I am really not a submissive woman in my everyday 'vanilla' life. I guess I like letting go off the control and put my life in someone else's hands. I just love playing the role of a submissive. It's hot!

Here we can see an example of why it is important to keep 'power' and 'dominance' within BDSM strictly contextual as it is clear that the two concepts are different than what we mean in real life social situations. In this case, in order to recognise the patriarchal and non – patriarchal we need to look at the importance of context, this follows Carlström who has made the importance of context central in her BDSM research – 'one practitioner describes BDSM as 'pain that is not distributed in a violent manner'' (2017: 276).

Another important aspect that makes BDSM encounters dramatic is the script. Roleplays are often scripted and carefully negotiated (Chare, 2014). Going back to the workshop, the Master explained that planning is crucial if we want to engage in such roleplay with our partners.

'You see, jolting a few lines down an hour before you decide to do this type of interrogation/torture roleplay is not enough to make the play successful. Everything has to be carefully written down, including what exactly the Dom will be saying, what exactly they will be doing to the sub and what exact tortures would be involved. Believe me, a successful interrogation play requires much work beforehand' (personal fieldwork notes; November, 2019)

This, of course, is to do with a highly intense roleplay usually reserved for experienced players, as much can go wrong. Furthermore, aftercare is also important. As the Submissive told us, she and her Master would spend two days in aftercare to make sure she is alright after the roleplay. This also needs careful consideration. Regardless, scripting even more mundane roleplay is a common practice mainly to establish ground rules, safe words and to ensure the safety of the partners (Williams and Prior, 2015). This event was fascinating, as it made us reflect on the way gender can work within BDSM and the sometimes-uncomfortable feelings we can get. After all, being confronted with what might look like a violent situation can be hard and we can stereotype, yet we immediately know it is not an actual violent situation in this case; the context is important. It has been theorized that BDSM operates in the realm of the spiritual, outside of socially imposed norms (Turley,

2022; Cattell – Daniels, 2015; Klement et al, 2017; Carlström, 2021; Zussman and Pierce, 1998) and not the literal. As Fennell (2018: 1060) discusses her participants' feelings during BDSM encounters:

Some respondents explained how these feelings of intense connection came about in terms of transcendent spirituality. Rather than just being about a moment of intense connection with a person, or a feeling of presence and connection, these people described their experiences more in terms of a nirvana-like generalized connection to all living things. In particular, people emphasized the experience of trust and the experience of giving up control as a vehicle for that sense of connection.

The BDSM reality is constructed through a spiritual and religious understanding of consciousness; it is real but also dreamlike. As argued in the Literature review, this is also how rituals are defined: 'ritual is a stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words, and objects, performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests' (Turner, 1973: 1100). A BDSM scene, just like a ritual, is a real event that is very carefully constructed, however. As Carlström (2021) writes, building upon Fennell (2018), something called a 'reality slip' can occur during a spiritual ritual and a BDSM role play, which is when 'we are suddenly overwhelmed by a strong force or feeling, either coming from inside our body or outside, which causes us to revise and re-examine the very essence of the world, the society, and ourselves' (p: 761). However, BDSM reality can be separated from 'everyday reality that someone inhibits, as BDSM: 'allows practitioners to move beyond the everyday experiences of reality and inhabit an alternative, curated reality. The various processes and rituals enable entry to a transformative and liminal space, which opens a realm of possibilities for radical transformative experiences' (Turley, 2022: 12; 13). So in this case BDSM can be a 'performance' as Lindemann (2012) argues. However, I want to open a caveat here with the way the concept of 'performance' is used in this thesis. It is not that performance is 'fake' or unreal. As I posit above, BDSM encounters are real. The performance here concerns the roles of the participants and the fantasy of the play. BDSM, it can be argued, exists in a liminal (Turner, 1979; van Gennep, 1960) space between the 'real' and the 'fantastical' (Turley, 2022; Blake, 2018). It is real because the feelings, affect and the material are all

there happening. The submission and/or the pain inflicted unto the submissive/masochist is real in so far as it is agreed upon and very specific. It is real but not literal, it is a pleasurable pain carefully negotiated prior to the activity. Because the power is not trapped but flows between the participants (Foucault, 1997) and it is only temporarily borrowed by the dominant, the pain is not literal. This is why I would agree with the theorizations that BDSM encounters are best understood as spiritual sites of consciousness and forms of rituals, as it explains this relationship between the 'real' and the 'performative' without making BDSM encounters fake or theatrical.

Building up from the above fieldwork example, in order to address how the gender roles were manifested and performed within BDSM, I would draw upon Butler. As they write: '[gender] ought not to be construed as a stable identity [...] gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.' (Butler, 199:179). Drawing upon Butler for BDSM studies on gender is neither new nor revolutionary. However, with some caution, my research contributes to the existing knowledge and would provide support for the flexible, performative and fluid interaction between different gender and BDSM identities. As argued above, it can be argued that BDSM is performative, as there are many different roles one can undertake. This is related to the practitioner's desires and who they are, which sometimes might not be clear immediately. In this sense, many of my participants referred to their BDSM identities as 'constantly evolving' or that they themselves have evolved to recognise what works best for them. In other words, it was rare that someone was identifying strictly with only one BDSM identity.

Emil and Alana were the organisers of a popular monthly event in the North of England while their BDSM relationship looked straightforward (Emil the Dom, Alana the sub), things were a bit more complicated. While, unfortunately, I could not have proper conversation with him as he was the main organiser, and thus quite busy throughout the evening making sure everything runs smoothly, I spent time conversing with Alana who was happy to tell me about their relationship. She told me she started off as a dominant and a sadist, dominating men and women alike and taking pleasure from their masochism until she met Emil. Their relationship is one of dominance and submission, where Alana is under Emil's control, however she is still a sadist. Now, Emil laughed and told me he is definitely not a masochist

when I asked him, and I was taken aback as having two sadists in a relationship sounded quite unique and paradoxical. So, Alana wants to explore her masochistic side with Emil, while she tops and releases her sadistic desires onto other women. ‘You see’, she said, ‘I really don’t want any other man but Emil. I am his slave and I am happy with this. However, as a bisexual, I am interested in other women and there is something sexy about a female masochistic sub. I maintain relationships with other women and I am always happy to offer my services.’

This is not a unique situation in BDSM as I came to know. There were other heterosexual couples of similar dynamics (female sub, male Dom) where the woman would top and submit other women but never other men while in a dominant/sub relationship with a man. Furthermore, the submissive woman would always strictly play with other women only with submissive men being generally ignored, which I would argue, plays into more traditional heteronormative scripts. For example, going back to Emil and Alana, while in a seemingly unconventional partnership, heteronormativity is being replicated – she is subbing for him but wants to dominate other women, not men. In this case, the heterosexuality and masculinity of her partner are not in danger; the heterosociality is not broken, thus rendering the relationships in the realms of heteronormativity. The term ‘heteronormativity’ has been often used by gender and queer theorists since the 90s in order to explain the sex/gender system (Herz and Johansson, 2015; Ward and Schneider, 2009; Robinson, 2016). In fact, the term can be traced to Gayle Rubin’s (1984) theorizations, where she ‘identified a system of hierarchical relations between men and women, but she also connected the theory of patriarchy with a more developed line of thought regarding how the suppression of women also leads to the suppression of different sexualities and identities’ (Herz and Johansson, 2015: 1010). For her the suppression of homosexuality and non – heteronormative behaviours, stems directly from the suppression of women and their sexualities which then produces the obligatory social organizations of sex and gender that privileges obligatory heterosexuality (Rubin, 2011). Consequently, for Wittig (1992) ‘matriarchy’ and ‘patriarchy’ are the same in the sense that actual liberation of women cannot be achieved through these systems as they both rely on biological components to define ‘gender’ and ‘sex’, thus they are both privileging at their core heterosexuality.

Instead, Wittig argues, we need to dismiss and break down the structures of heterosexuality which would lead to the categories of 'men' and 'women' becoming obsolete as well.

Of course, it is ironic, cynical even, to discuss BDSM as heteronormative, considering that for Rubin S/M is outside of heteronormativity, but we cannot let the practice without this critique. As it has already been argued by Rubin (1984), Wittig (1992), and Butler (1990), in order to destroy patriarchy and sexualities suppression, one needs to destabilize the obligatory heterosexual social system:

At the most general level, the social organization of sex rests upon gender, obligatory heterosexuality, and the constraint of female sexuality /. . ./ The suppression of the homosexual component of human sexuality, and by corollary, the oppression of homosexuals, is therefore a product of the same system (Rubin, 1997: 40).

BDSM still exists in our largely patriarchal heterosocial cultures; as such, it does not exist in a vacuum, so it is not difficult to understand how more 'mainstream' social norms can influence it.

This is not entirely surprising as all as the places I visited had pretty much the same set of visitors – heterosexual couples (note, at the very least heterosexual *presenting* couples; see Eastwood, 2019) with D/s dynamic where the woman is a sub and the man is the Dom. I enquired with Alana who has been running events for a few years in the Northeast. She explained that indeed events lack on the female dominant side but that there are specific dominatrix events that get frequented by prominent mistresses and their subs. So, to speak, there was not a great deal of diversity within the events. In fact, as I learned, many people could be pushed aside to the margins in the BDSM scene, which is ironic, considering that BDSM is seen as an alternative lifestyle kept in the fringes of 'acceptable' society. As I also came to learn, the manifestations of masculinities were much more complicated than I envisioned. Just like with the two demonstrators of the interrogation workshop who showed us an intensely beautiful relationship and roleplay, this was pretty much the standard, acceptable dynamic – the 'clean', respectable, dominant, straight masculinity combined with the gorgeously submissive, monogamous femininity. This dynamic in itself is

not problematic in any way and in fact can be very complicated and not as straightforward as it might appear at first and it can provide us with in depth insight into the manifestations of power in a D/s dynamic. However, certain dominant discourses around BDSM practices and masculinities started emerging and it was clear that men's bodies and masculinities are heavily regulated and policed.

In recent years the literature has documented the internal struggles within BDSM when it comes to identities and practices (Dymock, 2012; Baker et al, 2013). As the BDSM community has struggled to achieve a legitimate place in society and avoid charges of paraphilia and accusations of illegal practices, the scene has become more mainstream globally; in fact it could be argued too mainstream (Parchev, 2019). This has led to internal criticisms where some BDSMers prefer the 'good old days' when the scene was unapologetic, outrageous and genuinely deviant. As Parchev put it, '[t]he normalized and conformist mode is expressed especially in the internal divisions between BDSM practice and identities, by excluding some of the BDSM experiments as non-legitimate practice, and in a hierarchal hetero-normative division' (2019: 345). This is very well illustrated by a man with whom I had an online conversation. I did not even need to ask about the mainstreaming of BDSM as one of his first sentences he wrote to me was 'BDSM is not what it used to be...'. After I enquired about this, he replied that the main issue the scene has been facing is its normalisation and expansion.

'It's just too big now, too many people are allowed inside. The BDSM scene has been expanded so much that it has started to disappear. People are doing things, claiming it is BDSM while it isn't! And it's a shame. People are in it for the quick sex and short-term gratification. Subs no longer care about the pleasure of their doms and vice versa. They only care about themselves'. (online conversation, personal fieldnotes, October 2019)

Then he proceeded to explain that his BDSM is real, like in the old days and he has not been on the physical scene for years now as it is not the same anymore. At first, I thought this might be just an individual case but then I kept encountering those sentiments quite often. Going back to Parchev's observation on the hetero – normative division of good/bad BDSM practices, there was a very strong hetero – normative bonding among all the events I visited. It was very clear that people do not go to BDSM events for fast sex but attend it with

their partners, thus creating a highly coupled environment. It was difficult for single people to find partners (for example, there were no single women at the in-person events but me and quite a few single men) This is where BDSM can recreate the same 'mainstream' society relationships, based on observations from my in person fieldwork – couples are generally highly regarded and seen as safe; on the other hand, single people, especially people such as 'crossdressers' and transgender people can be pushed aside and it might be difficult for them to get partners, which will be discussed below. Evidence from the fieldwork suggests that this goes back to the obligatory heterosexuality and heterosociality, underpinning our society (Rubin, 1997; Herz and Johansson, 2015).

As I was reading through many venues and events guidelines, I noticed that women (single or in a same-sex couple) and male/female couples were regarded as non-dangerous and welcome everywhere, while single men were heavily excluded. Either they were denied access (unless they brought a woman with them), or the membership fees they had to pay were too high.

Furthermore, some exclusionary practices have been taking place within BDSM communities, which I argue is caused by heteronormativity. BDSM practitioners, however, have opened up a discourse on these issues. For example, a popular forum group on *fetlife.com* dedicated to BDSM theory, where people can debate and share information on the theories and experiences surrounding BDSM, demonstrates some insightful and controversial topics that show exactly how contradictory BDSM can be and how different people interpret it.

'People will interpret others' experiences in the context of their own, meaning that "if I don't feel that way, it means it's not possible that you feel that way either." What's more, people can feel intimidated by the idea of someone being a switch;' [...] I think it is more that the BDSM community has become more tolerant of switches in recent years- This is certainly my experience (online BDSM forum, access October, 2020)

Here we have evidence of the changes that might be occurring within BDSM, once binary understanding of gender and BDSM roles becomes eroded. As pointed out, the switch that might have been controversial is becoming a more accepted BDSM role, simply because

people understand that absolute binary structures are no longer working. The below data example, furthers this, as the practitioner argued that:

'I think it is not that Millennials and Gen Z are necessarily taking a negative view of fixed power exchange roles, but are feeling less pressured [into] fixed power exchange roles and feel more free to explore for themselves [...]it really seems that a lot of discourse around seems to be focused around Power Exchange, even to the extent to the extent that I sometimes see people literally define BDSM pretty much as Power Exchange. (online BDSM forum, accessed October, 2020)

Interestingly, the participant suggested that there is a generational aspect here. In fact, Drdová and Saxonberg (2021) have observed that younger BDSM practitioners are more willing to perform more contemporary BDSM roles and gender roles. That is, in their Eastern European study, they discovered that the younger people are more open to contingency and fluidity and are ascribing to more feminist views on the roles of men and women:

Erik from the younger generation explains the lack of 'dominant' females in the older generation leads to a high demand for them. Meanwhile, Irena (younger generation) notes that there are more 'switches' in the new generation community, so it depends on the thematic setting, whether there will be a 'dominant' female or not. So ironically, even though there is a tendency to associate BDSM with roleplaying, the young generation is less tied to pre-ordained roles and is more willing to switch roles. The fact that people freely choose roles and are able to switch them makes consensual BDSM different from societal roles and power relationships, which cannot easily change (2021:10).

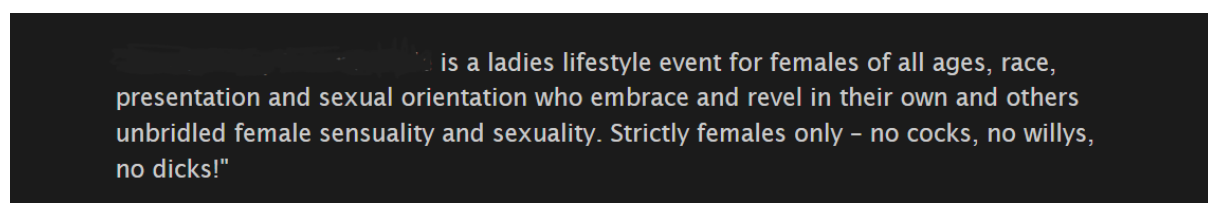
My data supports the arguments presented above by Drdová and Saxonberg (2021) and further argue that there is an overall tendency for BDSM practitioners to acknowledge that currently fluidity within both gender and generation is more noticeable. While Drdová and Saxonberg do not examine masculinities specifically, I would build upon this discussion in the following chapter ([Chapter 6, section 6.2.2](#)) where I would demonstrate how younger mean breaking the fixed structures of dominance/submission in addition to their own gender roles. However, we can see what BDSM can do for gender and masculinities – it can erode what they mean, by giving us new ways of creating meaning.

With the following sections, I am not only attempting to highlight the internal struggles and criticism that the BDSM scene might be facing but also the varied ways in which people perceive their sexualities, gender and BDSM identities and how they come together to perform sexual and social activities.

5. 2. 1. 'Look, I am not transphobic, however...' The Good, The Bad and the Excluded

When a popular Northwest BDSM event created a 'women only BDSM night', passion and feelings were running high due to the polarized message sent by the organisers. Exclusive female nights are not problematic on their own, per se; in fact, many of those events attract a large number of female visitors, in order for women (both cis and trans) to explore kink on their own and feel safer, considering some of the horror stories going around Fetlife about events whose [male] organisers are drugging young, inexperienced newbie female members (I found this information by chance – a man messaged me on Fetlife after my name appeared as 'attending' a BDSM party in the Midlands. He wanted to warn me to be careful as there are some monsters out there. However, I was not given proper evidence, but I did listen to him).

While female only events like the aforementioned send a message that the physical BDSM scene need not be scary and it is female friendly, another message also emerges – 'women only' can become exclusively cis women only. While the event organisers stated that all women were welcome, a smaller print read 'no male genitalia; anyone with a penis will not be allowed entry'.



is a ladies lifestyle event for females of all ages, race, presentation and sexual orientation who embrace and revel in their own and others unbridled female sensuality and sexuality. Strictly females only – no cocks, no willys, no dicks!"

Fig. 1. The original listing information, Fetlife, accessed. Accessed: July, 2020.

... we do welcome trans women providing they have undergone full GRS. No contradiction - we feel it is very clear from our event information that if you have male genitalia this is not an event for you, however else you may present.

Love from the

Fig. 2. The organisers defending their stance, Fetlife. Accessed: July, 2020.

Despite outrage where many people voiced their frustrations that the event is transphobic, the organisers defended themselves arguing that they are not against their 'transgender sisters' (direct quote) but they accept only the ones that have undergone genital surgery. I am attaching a redacted screenshot as the event was public, however, I will not be disclosing the name of the club and the organisers:

1. ... is an all-female swingers sex-party hosted at a swingers club with a kink element, due, in this instance, to full access to the ... dungeon, (which is why it is also being promoted through this site to female members of the kink community). If ... were a dedicated kink event this issue would not have arisen as our trans-sisters would have been welcomed, but it is not.
2. Whilst we fully respect and support the rights of our trans-sisters, we also fully respect and support the right of females from within the swingers and kink communities to have the freedom to attend one event free of male-genitalia should they choose to do so.
3. All events, both swinger and kink, have rules set by the organisers to which all attendees are expected to adhere and ... is no exception. If, as with any other event, you are unhappy with, or not prepared to adhere to, those rules - then please feel free to not attend it.
4. Those contemplating some form of punitive action against ... should be aware that ... is not a ... event. The club is being rented privately by ... as a venue for our event, and as such ... have no say nor influence over who may or may not attend. Anyone critical of our position on this issue is most welcome to approach ... with a view to renting the premises to host their own event, which they may then run as they choose.

Fig. 3. The response by the organisers of the event after being called out, accessed from Fetlife, July, 2020.

The language here reinforces ideas of essentialism and sex binary division where genitals equal person's gender and no flexibility is allowed. These ideas are usually presented by gender critical feminists (Stryker and Bettcher, 2016). Some people supported the organisers claiming that:

So let's get this straight. You're going to go out of your way to stand in the middle of an empty industrial estate and make a scene for all of 5-6 taxis that pass there in an hour, just because you can't accept that some women have a different opinion to you and are entitled to organise their own event, just as much as you are entitled to organise one of your own. What a nasty, vindictive bully you must be... (Online comment collection, Accessed: July, 2020).

I would argue, that the way the event information was formulated, implies the association of masculinity and trans femininity with danger, as the organisers kept referring to women wanting to feel safe. It is apparent that bodies become highly policed and pushed to conform to the sex/gender binary divide, considering that transgender women are seen as 'men' by the event organisers and are not allowed to occupy female spaces due to their perceived male status if they do not undergo a genital surgery. Genital centric ideas are weaponized in trans exclusionary radical feminist (TERF) discourses and anti – trans legislations (McKinnon, 2018), are sometimes not questioned within BDSM thus, it can be argued practitioners can create patriarchal hegemonic gender ideals within the scene. Femininity is perceived as safe (as long as it is attached to a cis – woman) which leads to problematic discourses against which BDSM is not immune, despite its gender critical origins and aspirations (Simula and Sumerau, 2017).

The event here is interesting as it opens the discourse of danger, safety and risk prevention. It is not very clear how successful and productive an event like this is towards female safety in reality – how would checking people's genitalia work in practice especially when many events do not even allow full nudity? How can safety and checks be enforced in this case? At the same time, we should not be minimizing women's fears and we need to acknowledge that BDSM events do pose risks and can be a breeding ground for sexual violence (Fanghanel, 2020). Then how do we negotiate female safety without transphobia? Manners (2019) argues that for a survivor of sexual assault, a trigger can manifest from anything that reminds the survivor of the traumatic memory and even the presence of men can be traumatic. As such, female only spaces are important, and this is specifically where inclusion becomes complicated (Manners, 2019). Manners further writes: "[a] survivor who is triggered by men will be triggered by anyone she perceives as male regardless of how they identify and this may be an automatic reaction that defies politics" (2019: 8). However,

Manners also points out that a masc – presenting cisgender lesbian woman can become excluded because she does not fit within socially accepted female representation. Which then begs again the question, how can you enforce female only event without victimising people and without breaching their bodily autonomy? As Jones (2020) points out, cisgender women are not the only ones entitled to safety and respect, yet we do need to be careful not to push out women and we must consider the very real fears of sexual violence that are statistically often perpetuated by men.

I would argue isolated events like this might create the illusion of safety, but it is not necessarily addressing the issue of violence and abuse within BDSM. This event did not bring a productive conversation about women's fears when it comes to attending BDSM/swinger events, instead it devolved into people arguing against/pro trans rights. Furthermore, many women did in fact point out that this is not what they want, so are even community voices considered when creating these events. As such, it might be more productive for female (and female presenting) gatherings and events to occur more often where BDSM community members can openly discuss the gendered violence and issues BDSM events can pose and to identify safety nets and points of action when harassment occurs. It should be on BDSM event organisers to think of people's safety within BDSM and acting appropriately against predators without targeting marginalised people and without banning 'penises' as this would not even work in practice.

Transphobia within BDSM is not an isolated event. A popular UK BDSM/ sex blogger wrote a very degrading blog post complaining from the 'forced gender ideology' and ranting against the use of pronouns. The blog was just about deleted while I was gathering the data for my thesis, however, other blog writers managed to create a pdf back up of the blog and the comments in order to share the issue of transphobia. While public domain, I will once again refrain from disclosing the name of the blogger. The blog has been written as an attempt at a 'clever' satire, yet the insults against trans people are thinly veiled:

Trigger Warning! This post contains content of a poly(syllabic) nature and addresses the trans(actional) paradigm of human discourse to illustrate that wrongspeak and wrongthink are illusory, subjective products of an immature, oppositional mindset likely to deliver unfashionably binary outcomes. Okay? Glad we're all on the same page. (All three of us I suspect, by this point but hey-ho.) **Editor's note:** *To optimise your Outside Inigo experience, this post is best read out loud in a safe space.*

This week we're looking at three types of word-warrior one might encounter in the Blog Watch officer corps: General Gender, and her equally charmless fellow officers, Major Transplainer and Corporal Cant. (If you think that last word is missing an apostrophe please look 'cant' up in the dictionary. I will not be accused of Apostrophobia). These are not, incidentally, specific people, but tiresome stereotypes which will be familiar to any regular blogophile. To begin at the beginning, the trifecta of common weeds named above were planted in the loose, pre-web topsoil of 1990's academia, although the vegetables themselves sprout firmly in the flower beds of modern Yoof. Ah yes, the Yoof, bless 'em. Out of natural politeness I listen when Yoof tells me what they think. Really – I listen. Unfortunately, due to wholesale corruption of our education systems, thoughts of Yoof are mostly gnat's piss. But out of empathy, I nod and I listen. Out of pity, I may even persist as Yoof expands into their Brave New Wheezes for a perfect world the rest of us were too dim to imagine.

And then, quite suddenly -because I was kind enough to listen when they told me what they thought- Yoof begins telling me *what I must think*. And while I am still giggling, tells me *how* I must think, and *how* to speak, and (oh my ribs are raw from laughing) *how to write*. At which point I crash open the mighty oak doors of Castle Inigo, fling wide my collared cloak and soar into the black, brooding sky, wings spread, moonlight glinting on the twin ivory sickles of my canine teeth. For once again, dear reader, as oft times before, I must feast upon the blood of the young.

Fig. 4. The first part of the blog post, accessed: August, 2020.

Ah, pronouns -doesn't a shiver run down your spine at the mere prospect of a pronoun war? Unless a quaint enthusiasm for the functional nature of evolved language inclines you towards a remark like "*we sorted out the pronouns ages ago, thankyou*". If so, beware! A squad of poorly-trained pronoun snipers are lurking in the non-binary bushes, just itching to catch you in their (extremely) cross hairs. These are not very rational individuals, but that's how the new boss -Major Transplainer- likes them. No matter if recruits are narrow-minded narcissists, activists, shallow-end theorists, adamant that any opinion beyond their own is an *ipso facto* outrage aimed directly at their precious, fragile ego. Battle has been joined and the Major nods in approval. *Slash and burn! Shock and Awe! Tear down the walls of something or other and we shall be free!* Physical and linguistic reality must go in history's dustbin because a cabal of the morbidly self-obsessed decided (five minutes ago) that principles of syntax and vocabulary employed for the last 2000 years are insufficient to describe the startling, unique nature of their own divine selves. Right! Left! Right, left, right! Ah, the tramping boots of the pronoun patrol.

For the record, just because I regularly gorge on human blood doesn't mean I'm humourless. Nothing -literally nothing- makes me laugh louder and longer than an uninvited online lecture from somebody demanding my "respect" because it is their "right". Followed, of course, by a handy set of instructions

explaining how, with what and to whom I may speak. Complete with guidelines to help craft my "apology" for having caused "offence", as I invariably will, sooner or later. *Permission to speak, sir?* Who died and put Major Transplainer in charge of the Ministry of Communication?

Awake and alone in a pocket of stone. I scarce my tired forehead with pallid fingertips, as skill night air

Fig. 5. Note the irrational fear of pronouns. Accessed: August, 2020.

The article clearly targets the use of pronouns, which is often weaponised by far right and trans exclusionary groups. For example, this problematic article by Murphy (2021) argues that:

It is not just offensive, on a personal level, to insist a woman or girl, for example, refer to an obvious male as “she” (never mind dangerous — where do our boundaries go when we have to pretend an exposed penis is not that?) but it is also entirely unnecessary. It helps no one to lie to them about their sex, which is a thing you are born with and cannot help. It is not an insult to refer to a male as “he.” Even if you don’t like “he” things. Referring to a man as “he” does not prevent him from wearing the clothes he wants to wear, growing his hair long, or even getting breast implants, if he so desires. It does, however, ensure people are allowed to acknowledge and speak the obvious truth, and avoids legitimizing the concept that one can change sex simply by announcing it so. It avoids training society to accept blatant lies, a la “We have always been at war with Eastasia,” which is essentially training to accept totalitarianism

[\(https://www.feministcurrent.com/2021/07/28/the-problem-with-preferred-pronouns/](https://www.feministcurrent.com/2021/07/28/the-problem-with-preferred-pronouns/), Accessed: September, 2021).

The irrational backlash against preferred ‘pronouns’ is often at the centre of societal transphobia. As Baron (2018) argues, often the backlash comes from religious standpoint, attempting to keep the patriarchal status quo of gender binary. However, the more widespread and insidious backlash is to do with the claims of free speech: ‘The free-speech argument is more direct: I can say whatever I want; you can’t make me say what I don’t want to say. Behind that libertarian veneer lurks hate. The Univ. of Toronto psychologist Jordan Peterson became a darling of the far right by announcing on his popular YouTube channel that no one can make him use gender-neutral pronouns—he’d risk jail or a fine or losing his job rather than violate the sacred rule that a pronoun must agree with its referent in gender and number’ (Baron, 2018: para. 8). This is exactly at the heart of the transphobic blog post, an appeal to freedom, free speech and it is aimed to preserve the English language. The way the author describes themselves is like a martyr and a warrior, trying to use logic to fight the ‘gender terrorists’. This is also a very common tactic by the alt right, who often appeal to ‘logical discourse’ and use irony and sarcasm to veil their bigotry

(Wilson, 2017). While the blogpost got taken down and the blogger even changed his name, many people reblogged it and agreed with it just showing how encompassing transphobia can be within the kink community and blogosphere in the UK. As one commentator put it:

FEBRUARY 29, 2020 AT 9:00 PM

I'm not a part of any of the marginalized groups you so openly mock and vilify in the name of what I suppose is meant to be intellectual humor and satire. Instead, it's one of the most insulting, degrading, lowly things I've seen in a very long time within the sex blogging community. And I'm horrified at the response you've received in the comments. Bloggers that I hold (or is that held?) in high esteem, enjoying something so short-sighted and narrow-minded.

How can people who bare their souls, asses, tits, vulvas, and cocks on the internet — for which they would be completely crucified in much of their non-sex blogging lives for — stand in judgement of the communities you mock in this post? To ask to be addressed by specific pronouns or to have their identity respected is the absolute LEAST any of us can do. It is the simplest thing in the world to be KIND. To not worry about what other people do with their bodies and identities and simply accept that we're all different.

Fig. 6. A response on the blog post, accessed August, 2020.

What piqued my interest in this comment is the irony of members of a marginalised subculture pushing away and hating members of another marginalised group. I would argue that this here is reproducing Rubin's Charmed circle (1984) inside the BDSM community.

This would be discussed further with the following data examples on crossdressing sissies.

A related point of discussion connected to transphobia is also vivid from the data I gathered on some of the crossdressing men I have encountered in the scene. Crossdressing men (who identify as men usually but do dress up as women during BDSM plays) are a phenomenon that has been understudied within BDSM scholarship and is mentioned only briefly when discussing BDSM identities (Turley, 2018; Vencatto, 2013). It is important to make a distinction between crossdressers and transgender people as the way gender is negotiated and represented can be quite different; furthermore, attitudes from BDSMers towards these people can also differ. A male crossdresser, (often they might be called 'a sissy', however, not all sissies are crossdressers and not all crossdressers necessarily want to be sissies) is often a heterosexual man who enjoys the touch, feel, and looks of female pretty underwear and/or clothes and dresses as an ultra-feminine woman during role plays. Crossdressing sissies (when the two categories overlap) are usually submissive (I have not come across sissies as dominants doing my research or in the literature, however, I have been told that sissies can be doms), very often assuming a French maid type of style and are usually servicing female dommes. When I came across crossdressing sissies in the parties I

attended, they identified as heterosexual men, who wanted to find a mistress to abuse them for her own pleasure. One of them (Jade) explained that they have been having difficulties on occasions because of their identities as a cross dresser. Jade shared a very specific kink they were into and they wanted to be humiliated by a mistress. Despite being willing to pay quite handsomely, they were turned down on multiple occasions and scammed out of money. Furthermore, they have been openly laughed at and deceived by a couple of professional mistresses. Jade assumed it was because they were not being taken seriously because of their gender identity and because of their kink of cross dressing '*I know it is weird, I understand this, but it is my kink and I am not hurting anybody; it is perfectly acceptable. I think this coupled with my non – normative gender identity makes people think I am taking the piss! I am not, it is who I am.*' (personal fieldwork notes; November, 2019).

Jade said they have been avoiding the BDSM scene for years due to bad experiences but are willing to get back into it as they found some understanding and support recently. The crossdressing sissies and the way they use ultra-femininity (read, femininity that relies on cultural symbols such as makeup, high heels, fashion, beauty and grace, Kelly, 2005) when in the role of a submissive can be seen by some of the practitioners that I came across as inherently problematic and sexist. A popular forum thread on Fetlife, where a dominatrix expressed her struggle to understand sissies and their notions of submission, sparked a rather heated debate.

I get plenty of so called "subs" that want to be sissified. They say it makes them more submissive. I disagree entirely. I believe most men (as I cannot say all with certainty) just get off on wearing women's clothing and are looking to get sex out of it. This does not make them a submissive at all. It makes them attention seeking sluts [...] As a woman I also get offended that dressing as a woman makes someone "submissive". I am anything but submissive no matter what clothing I am wearing -or no clothing at all. (online excerpt, BDSM forums, accessed: July, 2020).

I caught myself wondering the same thing and struggling with the notion when I spoke with Ellie, another crossdresser at an event. She (*note, I am using pronouns that my informant has explicitly stated they prefer when in a BDSM setting*) explained that her gender identity is complicated, and it largely depends on her BDSM partners. As Ellie put it herself,

'Right now I am Ellie, a submissive, sexy girl looking for someone to spank her. However, I am comfortable living as a male. I am not trying to pass as a woman, I am aware I don't even look like one. But I just love putting sexy clothes, wigs and make up. I am also comfortable topping and dominating as a male, I do have a streak of dominance within me. I always crave a dominatrix and I want to serve women or dominate them occasionally, depending on what my partner at the time wants. I am a heterosexual man after all, although I would suck a cock. I like being forced into bisexuality. After all, I think, no one is entirely straight.'

At first, I thought, Ellie uses problematically a feminine persona to enact her submission and to show that she is available for dominance. Furthermore, she does rely on physical markers such as 'not looking like a *real* woman' which in itself can be problematic as it enforces patriarchal binarism of what 'women' and 'men' should look like. At the same time, it can be argued that she was just cautious using female terminology, considering she did identify as a man outside of their kink.

Furthermore, the idea that she would switch to a male dominant if necessary can also be read problematically. The idea of using female characteristics and tie them to submission might seem like enforcing gender binary system deeply rooted into misogyny (McBride and Palkki, 2020). As if she, a heterosexual man outside of BDSM, reduces femininity to submission and masculinity to dominance. However, we can also have a different interpretation and we can read the situation as a performance. Unfortunately, MtF (male – to – female) crossdressers and people performing queer femininity are often degraded and pushed away from feminist discourses since their feminine performances are seen as ironic, full of sarcasm and guilty of portraying artificial femininity (Chess, 2016). As Julia Serano argued, however, (2016; 2012) it is important to stop reducing trans femininity and crossdressing practices as artificial and campy gender representations and show how impactful, beneficial and real they are. Serano here is attempting to break the forced rigidity of 'femininity'. That is, femininity can be treated as something closed and serious that belongs only to people born as female, which is a very essentialist and patriarchal view and it is very similar to how masculinities are seen, as argued by Dummitt (2011). We need to break down the rigidity of femininity and its association with female bodies and accept how people can perform it in productive ways.

In this regard, Ellie's feminine gender performance in particular was not about reducing women to submission and her showing oversexualised feminine style was not done to appropriate female struggles and mock them. Ellie's way of dressing was not related to her submission – she enjoyed femininity separately from her submissive tendencies.

Furthermore, she would change her persona in order to satisfy the wishes of her partner and would compromise in order to make a relationship work. She enquired about me, what I like and who I would play with. I tentatively replied I am heterosexual and if anything, I would like to explore a D/s dynamic with me as the submissive. Once I said this, Ellie responded that she would be more than happy to oblige and to play as a dominant man if I would like to. In this case, her dominance and masculine gender performance were situational depending on the context. When I turned down her offer she did not pursue and kept talking to me as if we were girlfriends.

Going through the discussions I gathered on BDSM forums, it was clear that, similarly to Ellie, many of the MtF crossdressing men enjoyed being sissified but had nothing to do with them being submissive. With or without the clothes, they would still be submissive. For example,

Clothes [don't] make the sub [definitely] applies. I think what you described applies to a lot of people who think they are submissive when they are really just into some kinky activities. I personally enjoy being fem and my dressing is not part of my submission but rather something I and we both enjoy it is a positive thing of our relationship. I can only speak for me I adore women so much so I like to look like one. I feel good when [I'm] dressed I am submissive I need to serve and will do pretty much anything for her approval. I [don't] try to act fake fem nor do I deny being male. But I do like being called her and she. (online extract, BDSM forum. Accessed: July, 2020)

When questioned, a few other men admitted that the sissification fetish was a big part of their submission. Being dressed as women and having their masculinity denied was described as one of the many humiliation techniques that submissive men can enjoy. In this sense, since there is much stigma in society about men wearing dresses and make up, being able to do this in the comfort of their BDSM relationship and being humiliated was part of their sexual enjoyment, as being demonstrated here:

Men don't get that same easygoingness, at all. To them, wearing a bra, or a sparkly shirt, or having makeup on is a way for them to explore something they've been forcibly restricted from trying their entire lives. Can men technically wear makeup and skirts if they wanted to in public? Yeah, but many of them would instantly get disowned by family or physically harmed. (Online excerpt, BDSM forum. Accessed, July, 2020).

Other men denied finding explanation for their kink – they just enjoyed crossdressing and their submission was described as situational – nothing to do with their gender, sex or who they dress up as but everything to do with what makes them and their partners ‘hot and bothered’. In her analysis on queer gender performances within BDSM, Zahn (2018: 55) demonstrates similar findings, where some of her participants employing high femme fashion styles did so because they liked the aesthetic and because it made the role plays more pleasurable, not because they wanted to be seen as women, thus showing a ‘de-gendering’ of the roleplays:

We get so wrapped up into gender and what we are supposed to be, rather than just BE who we are, and should not have to apologize for it I think that D/s relationships should BE what ever both parties want it to be, and none of it should be about force, unless that IS what both parties want [...] Focus on what makes your dick hard and your pussies wet (online excerpt, BDSM forum, accessed: July, 2020)

Antagonism within BDSM against crossdressing practices and trans women can come from two fronts – on one hand the patriarchal gender binary ideal where ‘men are men and women are women’ and on the other, through the gender critical radical feminism which also aims to reinforce sex binary where gender needs to correspond to the genitals someone was born with; both currents are connected through one thing – transmisogyny (Schweizer, 2017). Jay Basiliere (2019) examines feminist attitudes towards trans individuals, specifically drag kings. Since male privilege is seen as something innate and guaranteed to all people assigned a male sex at birth by certain radical feminist currents, this means people can become excluded from feminist, lesbian and women only spaces (Basiliere, 2019). These views on the innate nature of masculinity and maleness is why trans women are treated as dangerous and are denied their gender; subsequently drag kings and trans men are viewed as women using hegemonic masculinity to oppress other women and fit in with patriarchy (Basiliere, 2019). Stryker and Bettcher (2016) argue that

antitransgender rhetoric have been garnering momentum since recent gains for transgender human and civil rights, thus leading to higher levels of aggression specifically towards trans women and people performing queer femininity. In response to the gender critical feminist circles, Basiliere reads drag kings' performances as feminist, in that they are showcasing the limits of and parodying the hegemonic masculine ideals. The performances undermine the inherently perceived connection between masculinity and male bodies, thus deconstructing and reimagining masculinities within and for the feminist rhetoric (Basiliere, 2019).

When discussing specifically drag and the putting on gender performances, Butler argues, is a 'mundane way in which genders are appropriated, theatricalized, worn, and done; it implies that all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation' (2004: 127). She further highlights how drag is subversive in what we expect bodies to look like – it shows that 'femininity' does not belong to females just like masculinity does not belong to males. Looking at the crossdressing performances within BDSM it can be seen how they are decentralizing the relationship between the sexed body and gender; after all quite a few of the crossdressing sissies identify themselves as cis males who wear feminine gender identity without seeing themselves as women. In this sense, the Butlerian reading of crossdressing as subverting can be seen in the way the sissies themselves accept their identities. BDSM can provide those men with a safe outlet to experience and show subversion, since as vivid from the examples I have shown, this plays into the sexual fantasies of humiliation and transgression of social norms. Furthermore, crossdressing people can see gender and 'forced' feminization as kinks within BDSM that provide creative ways of exploring and experiencing desire.

By looking at potential explanations and justification for the sissy fem/submissive dichotomy, I am aware that my arguments may fall into the 'excuse trap' which can impact BDSM practices in a negative way (Dymock, 2012). That is, trying to always find an excuse or a deeper meaning behind certain fetishes and sex fantasies can cement the view that BDSM practitioners are engaging in dubious sexual practices and we need to find a way to redeem them (Barker, 2013; Lindemann, 2011).

Should we try to find explanation on why certain people enjoy certain fetishes considering they are performed by people who mutually enjoy them? Should we try to rationalise and

excuse someone dressing up as a sexy woman in order to feel more submissive? By looking at the way some men perceive BDSM roleplays and gender performances, one can not only identify and showcase the abundance of sexual practices people indulge in but also to display other practitioners' attitudes which are not always as accepting and positive as one might think. While BDSM might be on the outskirts of the 'charmed circle', where heterosexual, monogamous and 'normal' sexualities, as well as pair bonding practices are the social norm and everything else is pushed to the margins (Rubin, 1998), the scene can also recreate the same circle within it. In this case, some practices are perceived as better, safer, and the ones that everyone else should aspire to; then, there are practices which can become pushed aside and deemed either as 'fake' or bad. As I have discussed in the previous section, many of those attitudes can come from gatekeeping where people argue that their BDSM is true and aim to make others conform.

A lot of people argue that feminization shouldn't be categorized as humiliating, because there's nothing wrong with being feminine or female. I fundamentally disagree with the conclusion, but not the supporting premise of course. Feminization is absolutely humiliating for a male submissive, not because there's anything wrong with being feminine, but because by submitting ourselves to it we're violating pervasive patriarchal cultural norms that have been drilled into us regarding what it means to be a man. Men are taught to pursue and dominate, to seduce rather than to be seduced, to put on a façade of strength rather than to reveal our vulnerability. Feminization requires the male submissive to embody an aspect of himself that our culture would view as pathetic. That many women would view as pathetic. That being said, allowing yourself to be feminine in a sexual context can be an incredibly freeing and positive experience. I think it would best be described as "positive humiliation" (online BDSM group, Reddit.com; May 2021)

In this case, as the participant argues, being a woman is not humiliating; it is not a sign of submission and cannot be looked at through a single lens. As the participant above explains it is the stripping of masculinity tied to patriarchal power that is the humiliation since in patriarchal cultures one of the biggest insults to a man is to be compared to a woman. The 'sissification' (which in BDSM is another name of the practice of crossdressing) Does not come from 'women = submission thus humiliation' but 'patriarchy = hating on anything

feminine tied to a man thus humiliation'. The writer also points out how patriarchy can also drill the negative effects on straight women. Why would a woman want to be with a 'sissy' man? The submission does not necessarily have to be tied with the crossdressing. Being submissive and then craving humiliation are not necessarily the same kink nor do they have to be roleplayed the same way. Being a woman is not humiliating but wanting to be a woman as man in a patriarchal world does.

In addition to this, as mentioned earlier, I hypothesise that the recreation of the 'charmed circle' might be the price BDSM has to pay to become mainstream and understood by the non BDSM individuals. According to Weinberg (2016) in order for BDSM to achieve certain legal rights and acceptance it needs something else first – social decriminalization. Social decriminalization, as Weinberg argues, is about making certain activity tolerable to the broader society, which would precede the legal decriminalization. With BDSM specifically, Weinberg (2016) demonstrates that younger participants want higher level of intervention and rule enforcement unlike the older ones who want things to be more relaxed. Langridge and Parchev (2018) posit that while critique of certain BDSM practices enforced under hetero – patriarchal and racial conditions is necessary, particular sexual practices and their practitioners can become silenced, policed and their voices disregarded. Langridge and Parchev (2018) discuss how BDSM participants have aimed to normalise their behaviour by making sure the BDSM practices conform within wider socio – cultural conventions which in turn can undermine the plurality and contingency of preferences, as well as the freedom to choose and indulge in mutually consented practices.

Drawing upon McDonald (2016), the analysis on gender performed by masculine bodies (in the case with the crossdressing sissies) can show us in practice the relations between masculinities, bodies and their affective power, and showing masculinities as creative forces that are not necessarily separate from other gender performances. As McDonalds puts it,

I posit that if masculinities are to escape classification by the strict and oppressive category posited by man and enter into a series of constant becomings, then we should risk the hypothesis that masculinities are already all they can ever become. In other words, no matter what we decide that masculinities or femininities are, masculinities cannot be classified as exclusively male a posteriori. (2016: 67)

This approach by McDonalds, can help us theorize the way sissification might work within BDSM – we need to be able to keep breaking the structural categories of gender and move away from preordained relationship between bodies and gendered expressions. The crossdressing practitioners in this case can break down these categories and begin a transformation of the way the masculine body is seen and treated (as something closed and constant which is a patriarchal view, Dummitt, 2011).

As I proposed in my previous chapters (see Literature Review) based on recent criticisms against the contemporary studies on masculinities (Elliot, 2020), masculinities should be addressed as contingent and flexible performances through the lenses of feminism and post – structuralism. Evidenced through the empirical data presented so far, it is clear that men are performing queer masculinities and femininities and blurring the line between bodies, gender and sexualities within BDSM which offers space for the exploration and playing with what masculinity should be. Even when there might be evidence of certain structures and hierarchies at play, which can replicate gender binary systems, it is not as simple and easy to pinpoint, as I will demonstrate in the following section.

5. 2. 2. Pop culture and BDSM: Between the real and the fake

I was looking at the play scenes with a dose of discomfort bothered by my voyeurism, awkwardly clutching the plastic cup with soda I just got from the bar. A man saw me and asked whether he can sit next to me. I nodded and he asked, 'So is this your first time here?' I replied that it was. 'Oh, that's cool. It's my first time here in this city although I did visit an event down the South a few months ago. But this is so much better! Everyone is quite friendly, right?' Then he would constantly switch his gaze from me to the people playing while continuing to make small talk with me. I didn't mind. It was nice having someone friendly to talk to; made me feel much less like I didn't belong there. Between the lowkey flirtation, the compliments, and the desperate attempts to get my phone number, he would be exclaiming things like, 'Oh wow! Did you see how he used that cane on her? Hm, never thought of that myself. His technique is amazing, don't you think?', 'Damn, that was intense! I hope this individual is OK. Everything is so interesting. Everyone is so different, and I am learning so much!'. Indeed the play scenes were quite fascinating with people creatively

finding ways to enjoy their fetishes, kinks and desires. I have never witnessed anything like that before. I started feeling more comfortable and noticed all the other people observing and commenting on the play scenes unfolding in front of us. At some point it just felt normal and not that interesting – I thought the plays were becoming repetitive, and no one cared whether they were observed or the observing ones. Or at least it seemed that they didn't care. Well, I hope that they didn't. People would stare at me and try to talk to me – I was also being observed. I belonged there. I was an active participant in this place. Did they find me fascinating also? Yay? (fieldwork notes)

Of course, crossdressers and people performing queer gender representations were not pushed aside at all times and BDSM can and does offer safe outlets for people. Arguing that the BDSM scene is exclusive at all times would not be a fair representation of the scene and some of my findings were consistent with the literature. As Patrick Califia noted (2000) gender is not necessarily important in BDSM; it is the BDSM identity that is central for practitioners. That is, for example, as Califia posits (2000), a straight dominatrix would prefer a female sub to vanilla male. This has also been reported in the findings of Better and Simula (2015) who have argued that gender within BDSM plays can be unimportant and perceived differently by practitioners compared to non BDSM people. Newmahr's research (2011) within the Caeden S/M community showed a scene where people were actively living 'outside' gender and were not performing femininities or masculinities. While, within my observations people were in fact performing gender, there were many instances where plays were happening among people where the gender identity and sexual orientation were not what mattered most and were irrelevant.

The event I described above was held at a prominent LGBTQI+ club in the Midlands, which hosts various sexual and kink/fetish events that are praised for their gender and sexual inclusion. In fact, many of the attendees identified as sissy bois and brats (a subcategory of specifically young sissies who defy their masters as part of their mutual kink), as well as many people who were gender fluid and non-binary. In other words, as I have already mentioned, the event was very versatile, unlike most of the following parties I attended where heteronormative pair bonding was predominant. Both as a researcher and attendee, I felt pretty good at that party. Since it was a club there was a central dance area that was transformed into a 'play space' with various equipment that allowed for rope suspension

plays with many tying spaces, and a big St Andrew's Cross, as well as an electroshock and medical play area. The major play area was very well lit giving away the idea of a theatre like stage. All around it were positioned the social spaces where people could sit, have drinks, observe and talk with each other. These social spaces formed a large circle around the play space, ensuring the people engaging in activities were always visible. After I walked around the club for a while I queued at the bar for a drink while observing the play space. I looked around for a place to sit as my feet were not agreeing with the high heels I was wearing. The social areas were much busier than the play space with people chatting happily with each other and observing the role players. Despite being dressed in full BDSM regalia, many people never engaged in plays but did socialise with friends. The scenes and role-plays I observed were very diverse and intense. As it was a relatively large party with many attendees, most of them were not there with partners unlike other smaller, low key events which serve specifically for people to play with partners that they already knew. Instead people were going to this club to meet others and play with them and encouraging newbies to find connections and to socialise. As I mentioned, while people often played with each other regardless of gender or sexual orientation (for example, quite a few straight dom men indulged in the punishment of other males, females and sissies), gender was still performed. That is, [cis] men and women were operating within their respective genders in a very stereotypical ways – even the dominatrixes along with the submissive women were wearing highly sexualised outfits, outlining their bodies. Most submissive women and sissies were walking around naked while the men were fully clothed. Two men asked me whether I want to play with them and be their submissive. The man I befriended later also asked me this. Why did they think I was a submissive? I looked down at my black lace see through top and black velvet miniskirt paired with the stiletto heels. Oh... Was I positioned in a certain space due to the way I presented myself? Was my ultra – feminine gender performance reduced to submission? Unfortunately, yes.

As the event was geared towards new people and was advertised as a newbie friendly space for people to familiarise themselves with BDSM, it is possible that many of the attendees (including me) were influenced by pop culture and mainstream representation of BDSM. Khan (2018) argues that the image of the 'dominatrix' is often hyper – sexualised and presented as a femme fatale figure using her femininity and sexy persona to entice men.

Hence why specialised BDSM outfits for dommes often are made to look sexy. Another popular representation of BDSM in mainstream media is usually the bounded, submissive female body who adheres to westernized stereotypical notions of beauty; the thin, white, young, cleanly shaven, beautiful woman in ropes (Pivec, 2015). Often the way dominatrixes are seen is in their ability to be 'play things' for men. This is illustrated with the following discussion:

BDSM perceptions and acceptance vary from country to country, somewhat due to cultural reasons and somewhat due to legal reasons. The only prominent ingress into mainstream culture of BDSM has been 50 Shades - which in itself carries so many flaws that the gender/role perceptions are insignificant in the wider context. Growing up in the UK there have been many instances of BDSM coming into the consciousness of the general public, and far from being a young attractive couple, a wealthy man taking a nubile minx in his grasp[.] [I]t's been an establishment man, be it politician, judge or wealthy businessman being tied and whipped by a (typically paid for) Dominatrix. (Online extract)

As seen from the example shown, the BDSM scene might struggle with what it is supposed to be (the transgressive, barrier breaking and gender messy space that goes against patriarchal depictions of relationships) and what it might become (a space not immunised against stereotypical depictions of gender roles). In addition, the event I described earlier is the perfect example of the meeting point between BDSM and the mainstream and the way attendees who might not have much experience can bring 'outside' influence in the way gender and BDSM roles were understood.

5. 3. Conclusion

This analysis chapter introduced some of the overarching themes that were noticed in the first stages of my in person fieldwork. It is clear that while BDSM is highly transgressive scene that challenges and breaks down heteronormativity and gender binary, it can fall into these same pits as it does not exist in a vacuum. BDSM does have the ability to transgress, but unfortunately, it can also be complicit in replicating the same patriarchal social relations that are common in the outside 'mainstream culture'. In this sense, Rubin's charmed circle

becomes true for the BDSM scene itself, leading to some exclusionary and problematic practices. This should not be seen as an attack on the scene, but we need to be aware of some of the problematic discourses that can take place and take them into account when reporting on how gender relations are being understood, challenged, challenged, and replicated.

Analysis Chapter 6

Love in the times of Coronavirus: Sexual online platforms and negotiating gender

6. 1. Introduction

With the previous chapters, the focus fell specifically on certain BDSM roles and the way men negotiate their masculinities and identities through said roles. As such, I argued that BDSM roles, as well as the accompanying gender performances, are fluid and a structural approach of looking at masculinities is becoming limited.

One such cultural change, would be the use of internet spaces and the participation in online BDSM platforms which gives people easier access to the scene and welcomes new practitioners all the time (Fay et al, 2016). As the physical BDSM scene, especially in the past, has been quite inaccessible, the growing use of the online sphere has made it easier for people to learn more about BDSM and connect with likeminded people. Now, with the threat of many physical venues being closed permanently, due to the Covid – 19 pandemic, as suggested by the fieldwork, the internet appears to have even bigger role in the practitioners' lives, with a few virtual events taking place and roleplays over zoom. There are also number of blogs and websites hosted by BDSMers where they share their lives, practices and aim to educate people on BDSM. YouTube has also become a popular platform with many BDSM vloggers uploading easily accessible content for users.

Considering this, this thesis argues that gender performances are becoming more visible and varied and, in a way, people challenge each other's beliefs easier (Pereira et al, 2013). My research has identified that online discussions and forums let us see different people's opinions on what constitutes BDSM for them, how they navigate their gender performances and what the BDSM roles they undertake mean for them. This chapter specifically pays attention to the way younger men are navigating their BDSM performances.

As a result, I am suggesting a restructuring of how BDSM is being practised in that practitioners can challenge some toxic notions, abuse and misogyny when they see it, thus

educating others, especially when it comes to issues of consent and abuse masked as BDSM. The online sphere provides insights into how in response to COVID BDSM practices are being configured. This reconfiguration is producing new practices and new ways of investigating them.

McLean (2020) argues that young people of diverse backgrounds are using digital spaces and platforms to challenge sexist, misogynistic, racist, and homophobic discourses on the internet and are not just passive observers. In this sense, while the digital is not perfect and can replicate and strengthen oppression, it also has potentially transformative powers that are being actively utilised by people, especially young women (McLean, 2020): 'Digital technologies are understood as offering possibilities for generative change and recreating, and producing new forms of, oppressions and marginalisation; this book argues that digital geographies contain multiple trajectories, ranging from the oppressive to the liberatory' (2020: 178). This digital engagement exists within BDSM platforms, and I would support McLean's observations in that BDSM practitioners are not passive towards hate speech discourses and actively challenge others and call out abusive red flags that someone's partner might display.

All this also has implications on how gender and masculinities are being navigated within BDSM. As I have demonstrated previously, in Chapter 4, within BDSM masculinities can be understood differently compared to other sexual scenes and spaces. While patriarchal and traditional ways of being a man can take place and people can actively subscribe to those through BDSM (Martinez, 2018), there is also a much more complex understanding of how gender works. However, whether this is a direct result of the widening and visibility of BDSM or due to changes in our everyday perception of what masculinities should be is not clear. It might be possible and it might be argued that these processes have been taking place for a long time, considering BDSM's transgressive position, as based from my research. Yet it is also possible that it had been brought to our attention only recently due to the growing visibility of BDSM. Unfortunately, more data and research need to be done on this specific idea. ([See chapter 8, section 8.2 Reflections, Limitations and future directions](#)).

6. 2. Research within the online sphere: Where kink is the new cool

6. 2. 1. *BDSM, porn and gender: The makeup of the online sexual platforms*

As I argued in chapter 2 **Literature Review**, studying masculinities and BDSM through digital engagement and the online sphere addresses a limited engagement in the literature and can aid us to see much more varied ways of performing both gender and BDSM roles. In the following sections, I aim to illustrate how the digital can aid us in mapping some men's understanding of contemporary gender expressions connected to their performances of BDSM as roles.

Making an account in BDSMlr was a wild ride, as it is mainly and predominantly just porn and hardcore BDSM, which of course is the point. Yet, the site already felt different than Tumblr. While the layout and affordances are exactly the same, meaning, you specify your interests to begin with and then you are offered blogs to follow based on your preferences, it definitely was not Tumblr; Tumblr was merging sexual with non-sexual, and pornography was easy to find without even having to search for it too much. As Tiidenberg (2019: 363) recollects, it was quite easy to find people expressing their '(sex) lives, fantasies, desires, and anxieties so openly; that those people seemed quite charming, interesting, and intelligent; that some of those people created sexual content (of) themselves, even though they were parents, students, teachers, office managers, librarians, lawyers or scientists off Tumblr.' This brings me to the 'liminal' aspect of BDSMlr, in that people could merge their sexual desires, gender identities, kinks, and art with other non-sexual aspects of their lives and moving in-between those blurred lines. However, BDSMlr was specifically designed for those users with specific interest in BDSM and in this case it does not have the same flow between sexualized and non – sexualized content. Yet, the website does challenge the idea of kinksters and porn users as those solitary creeps enjoying pornography in secret – as Tziallas (2016) argues, the ability to create and share with millions of other users personalised and reworked porn gifs, challenges the old idea of the porn consumer as detached from society and others based on their interest.

Cho (2015) even puts forward the idea of Tumblr's dashboard feed as an 'assemblage', based on Deleuze and Guattari (1987). As assemblage is the idea of an 'interconnected messiness' and constant multiplicities, where 'multiplicity has neither subject nor object,

only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 8), Cho posits that the posts on Tumblr perfectly capture the idea of the living, breathing, interconnected assemblage that gets shared, edited and recreated. Browsing through BDSMLr similarly one can also see the idea of the assemblage as well, in that sharing and connecting with others is quite easy and reposting gifs and images gives the sense of connecting to people you do not know on a very personal level. Similarly to Cho’s research into Tumblr, I noticed that by sharing posts on BDSMLr, you can also alter them to make them fit your aesthetic, desires and thoughts.

There are also no physical categories between the types of kinks and porn, which Engelberg and Needham (2019) discuss in relation to Tumblr’s algorithms (see Literature review for the discussion). In other words, people come across a variety of practices without searching for them; there is a wider exposure. The binaristic model of Porn sites is missing. What Engelberg and Needham are arguing here is that, ‘Pornhub and many other tubesites operate strict divisions between ‘gay’ and ‘straight’ porn, consequently rendering a user’s access contingent upon a binaristic choice. An obvious limitation evident here is the prerequisite to make a monosexual choice, a demand that precludes the possibility of a non-monosexual, bisexual, or queer approach to porn consumption’ (2019:351). These porn sites work with strict categories and you have to position your choice in these pre – ordained categories.

While you can still type specific terms that you are interested in in the search bar, such as #bondage, or #sexart, you get a wide range of blogs, posts and people to follow that seem almost random and have wide range of recommendation. When I typed in #art, I got blogs with queer art, trans art, nude selfies and just general pornographic material that was not constrained within any specific category. Interestingly, when I typed in more specific gendered terms like #masculinity or #femininity, I got no results whatsoever, however, when using #men or #women instead, I got results ranging from gifs and pictures of submissive men to dominant men, trans men, gay porn, drawings of penises, nude fan art of famous book characters and so on, giving me very nonspecific recommendations. Overall, however, BDSMLr is a badly kept website, difficult to navigate with barely any regulations, with users complaining about instances of hardcore misogyny, racism, homophobia, and child pornography.

While the current Tumblr's policy on NSFW is extremely regulated, it is not entirely true that there are no longer BDSM, porn or kink blogs. In fact, based on my observations, BDSM and kink are still popular on the website, however, if a blog gets marked as 'sensitive' by the algorithm, it gets deleted quickly (Tiidenberg, 2019; 2021). The main issue is to do with fully nude images and gifs (for example female presenting nipples are entirely banned); however, people are free to write pornographic stories, fanfics, and diary entries. While NSFW materials no longer appear people's feeds unless they follow a specific NSFW blog, searching for BDSM and kink gives plenty of results.

The main results when using the #BD/SM in the search tool shows diverse posts and pictures created by users. While visually most pictures and selfies were of naked women, they were taken and styled by the women themselves usually followed by a racy quote, caption or post. The most popular represented masculinity is one of danger, darkness, high sexuality, but also mixed with feminism, sweetness, and emotion. Example fig. 1:

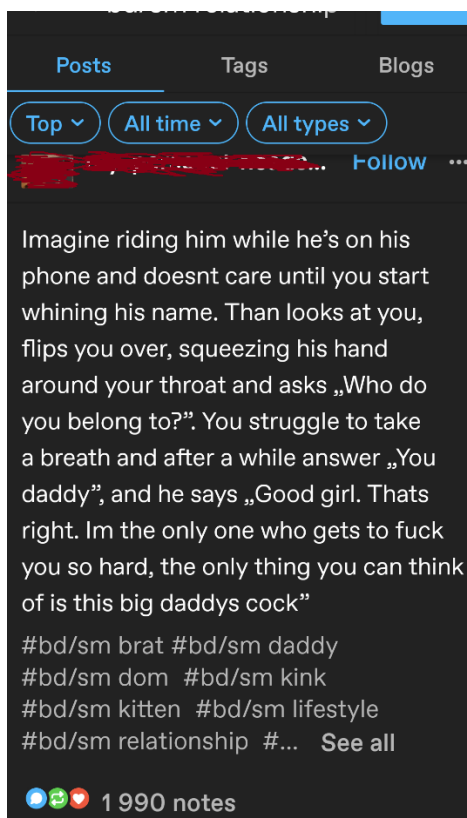


Fig. 7. Tumblr post detailing a fantasy, accessed: October, 2021

In this sense, there is an assumption that there is desire for gentler and more romantic caring daddy dom masculinities, which is something that would be discussed in-depth in the

following section, in order to show that dominance within BDSM is very diverse and complex male dominants are not necessarily sadistic or complying with 'toxic' forms of masculinities. Here we can also see Tziallas' argument (2016), that the creators and consumers of pornographic material on Tumblr are not detached but participating in a living, breathing system consisting of shares, reposts, discussions and dialogues. People do not just write out racy fantasies, they reblog them, add their own words and caption to them, share them and this becomes a living artful space.

Tumblr also provides ground for challenging certain BDSM behaviours and toxic and abusive Dom/mes, with issues surrounding consent often being discussed (Tiidenberg and Whelan, 2019). Trigger warnings of sensitive blog posts are utilised by whomever is posting them, thus making sure people feel safe browsing the more edgy sex posts, with users who do not provide TW being called out. Profiles that might be crossing the line between BDSM and abuse are reported and spread around. Men do challenge problematic and misogynistic notions surrounding masculinities, especially when it comes to dominance. Often 'toxic masculinity' is being framed as boyish and 'fake,' something that men can choose to and need to grow out of.

Been reading ur blog. U need to stop calling urself a dom. All this lovey crap makes real doms sick. A sub is not for respecting and loving. A sub is for using and thats what they like. Its fine that u love ur girl, just dont call urself a dom. Real doms show dominance, use [their] sub and leave her laying like the cunt slut she is. Bein all sweet, and all that does is give her power over u, which makes u not a dom.

(Anonymous post, Tumblr.com)

Hi there, Anon. I almost didn't even dignify this with a response, but I think you've actually given me a good opportunity to say something that new doms need to know, so kudos to you. First and foremost, let's establish something right here and now: You don't get to tell me what I am, and you are damn sure not the leading authority on what does and does not constitute a dominant. For the record, I didn't wake up one day and decide to be a dom. I never even thought of myself that way until I met [...]10 years ago. I always had the characteristics of a dom, sure, but I didn't ever put that title on myself. That title was given to me by my submissive. SHE is the one who wanted to call me Master, and Sir. I never told her to do these things. But of course,

you probably think I am making your point for you and that if I were a REAL domly dom, I would've demanded those things [...] Bottom line, Anon, is this: you sound like a boy playing at being a man. You decided one day that you were sick of women having willpower and a voice of their own, so you decided to call yourself a dominant and seek out some weak-willed submissive who wouldn't talk back to you or stick up for herself. You are not a dom. You are a jackass with a whip. (Reply, Tumblr.com, BDSM discussion)

Let's also revise that "Dom/he Sub/she". I might love being a sub...but I sure as hell like to dominate a man. ;) (Reply, BDSM discussion, Tumblr.com)

In the original comment 'Dominance' is equated to masculinity and the word 'Dom' gets heavily gendered to mean a 'man'. Consequently, the sub is feminized. As such 'real Dom' in this participant's discourse would be a male Dom exerting disproportionate power over the sub. In the follow-up response, the commenter challenges the abusive and toxic aspect but does not de-gender the terms. Only when the third participant gets involved does the whole dynamic get challenged. In this case, we can see two different male Dominants who perform dominance in different ways – the first is seen as unacceptable by the people involved in the conversation, abusive, toxic, and fake. The second is juxtaposed as what a Dom should be and shows equilibrium between submission and dominance; a symbiosis even, where the one cannot exist without the other thus complicates the issue of how power is exercised. Here, there is also certain incompatibility between domination and toxic masculinity that is often discussed in the online sphere, as well as challenging of the 'she-sub/he-Dom' dichotomy which would be unpacked in greater details in the [following section](#).

The interesting aspect of the above conversation is also the input of other commenters, calling out some of the gendered discourse, consequently moving the conversation to what acceptable and unacceptable BDSM behaviour is. Nixon and Düsterhöft (2017) also present a wide range of studies based on online discourses and sex, which illuminates how people find communities and help online and are opening up about their sexual interests and desires. It is noticeable how easy it is to have the conversation on sexual practices online, which can also result in a wider impact. Tumblr here provides the opportunity for all these conversations to be reblogged and reshared instantly, thus reaching wide audiences. For

example, I came unto this conversation because someone I followed reblogged it, which in turn was reblogged by someone else and so on. This archiving, sharing and curative power of Tumblr is important for the purposes of the thesis and the research, since as argued by Engelberg and Needham (2019), the blogs present personal histories and memory blogs. De Kosnik (2016: 135) also writes:

One of the greatest political potentials of rogue digital archives is that groups that have occupied the margins of “mainstream” society, and have consequently been largely marginalized by traditional memory institutions, can build their own robust cultural memory sites, as something like counterinstitutions, akin to the “counternarratives” told by postcolonial, ethnic, and feminist writers who archontically rewrite the stories of dominant culture [...]

Using these digital spaces, as De Kosnik posits, lets people from marginalised backgrounds take their own stories into their hands and share their lives, experiences, desires, and cultural markers. In the specific case with Tumblr, the users who might otherwise be ostracised by mainstream society, have the ability to produce and let others into their lives and discuss in frank ways their kinks, sexual pleasures and be creative with it. By researching BDSM on Tumblr, I was part of the written histories as I participated by following, reblogging and reading. These real histories can give us great insights into the way more personal issues such as gender or sexual identities are manifested without the fear of ostracising. What it is to be a man, a Dom or masc presenting person in BDSM is discussed, reproduced and reblogged through this archiving. As such we can follow how masculinities operate within BDSM in real life, not just as abstract theories or concepts.

In the following section an in-depth discussion concerning the points brought forward here would be presented specifically concerning the way masculinities and male domination within BDSM are being understood by the younger scene participants and the ability for BDSM to bring forward much needed discourse on the multiplicities of masculinities, as well as the generational differences between men that might be going unacknowledged (Hopkins and Murray, 2014). The discussion I have presented so far on Tumblr and online sharing and blogging, is important for the purposes of the study in order to show the potential of the online platforms into the study of gender, masculinities specifically, within a still marginalised sexual scene such as BDSM. Furthermore, my research also indicates how the

affordances of the platform enable different configurations of BDSM identities and potential practices, demonstrating that the online space is not necessarily constrained by the performance of more static offline identities.

6. 2. 2. Boomers vs Zoomers: The generational differences in masculinities in the new age BDSM

The internet search for data was quite fruitful in terms of finding discussions by people that come from different backgrounds and it is especially useful in order to find younger voices. Reddit was especially useful for this, as the site is entirely anonymised but posts in relationship and BDSM groups do require people's ages. As such, this thesis is arguing that moving towards the online can tell us more about generational differences in masculinities within the BDSM scene.

As McLean's study (2020) shows, the theories of 'hegemonic' and 'masculinities in crisis', are outdated and do not reflect modern social, cultural and contextual changes and it is difficult to apply them to younger men. In her ethnographic study among young men from Sierra Leone, McLean shows that many of them do strive for egalitarian relationships and fatherhood, unlike what is suggested in most studies done on masculinities among various African countries. As McLean (2020: 3) writes:

Although the 'crisis of masculinity' trope is now widespread, it is flawed in several ways. First, masculinities cannot be 'in crisis' because such an interpretation assumes a single, coherent construction (Decoteau 2013); instead Connell (1995) acknowledges that masculinities develop in social practice, via men's interactions and everyday enactments of gender. The current literature from Africa suggests that a wider variety of masculinities are evident beyond hegemonic forms, including queer and other non-heteronormative gender identities (Livermon 2012; Ratele 2014, 2015). Second, the categorical essentialism that results from such a static characterization is problematic in that it neglects the diversities and complexities of masculinities (Inhorn 2012)[...] Scholars have further critiqued the concept in that it blames men for problems that are more political and economic in nature and

because it may actually serve to perpetuate male privilege (Cornwall, Karioris, and Lindsfarne 2016; Smith 2017; Wyrod 2016).

McClean's analysis shows that often masculinities and men in general, are held responsible for larger economic and political issues, that often are outside of the remit of gender. This makes it hard to imagine masculinities existing as anything else but oppression which is a theoretical and feminist paradox – if masculinities are at fault and masculinities would always exist, how can we ever destabilize patriarchy and power? In other words, we criticise men for the privilege and power handed to them by economic and political currents, but social theories are also looking at masculinities as rigid and powerful. Another theme that McClean's study puts forward is the fact that young men's experiences and performances of masculinities currently need more studying. We can pose valid criticism at ignoring how young men might find it difficult to position themselves into scripted gendered categories that might not be valid anymore. When posing critiques against BDSM and kink, a certain universalism is applied – all BDSM/kink is bad because it stems from men's need to control women, as Scott argues (2015). As she writes (2015: 63):

[e]ven though it is feminism which challenges the very belief that nature slots male and female into neat dom/sub roles, there still seemed to be an unease among feminists who felt that there exists a base instinct in men to dominate women, which if allowed free rein via kink, would become dangerous.

In political and popular discourse, as well as academic, the BDSM submission of women is treated as an inherent constant, unlike the dominance; with men, the submission might lead to a degree of ridicule but is not treated as a constant, unlike the dominance (Scott, 2015). The fact that there are so many roles within BDSM, and the fact that not all participants are cis het men and women, often goes unacknowledged. The issue stems from the way 'women' are understood as a political category (the 'oppressed') which limits the analytical understanding of what is happening within the scene. 'Women' and 'Men' as categories can be limiting and it does little to acknowledge the multiplicities taking place when it comes to gender and sexualities. As Lorber posit: '[f]eminist researchers start with the assumption that the content and dividing lines for genders, sexes, and sexualities are fluid, intertwined, and crosscut by other major social statuses; thus, there are no "opposites" (2006: 450). In

this case, different variations of gender experiences cannot be categorized as this leaves out many other experiences that might not even fit within the structures of what is assumed 'men' and 'women' are. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge this when discussing people's experiences specifically here in BDSM context. This is one of the reasons why often in online BDSM forums, women express frustration, worries or disappointment with some feminist currents:

Got banned from r/feminism for supporting bdsm. All I said is that it's consensual and can be an expression of love and compassion, I see myself as a feminist in many ways. But also just love the idea of being out of control of being fully possessed and dominated. I have had a hard troubled and abused life, but that does not exclude me from feminist issues. It pisses me off that women who enjoy domination even with other women are so discriminated against in the reddit feminist community for being "brainwashed". (online BDSM group discussion, reddit.com)

As shown, certain feminist currents can slip into erasing women's choices and when women argue against it, they are labelled as 'brainwashed by patriarchy.'

OP, unfortunately you're not the first person to report this sort of thing here. That subreddit has very strict views on what they consider feminism to be. Whether we agree with their politics. Whether we like what they say. It's their subreddit, they're free to run it any way they want. (online BDSM group discussion, reddit.com)

Yup. I saw someone saying - in a BDSM context - that 'someone who loves you doesn't want to hit you'. It's shame that some people have a definition of feminism that all but eliminates female choice. Sounds like the opposite of feminism to me. Sooooo....how about that feminism? A man can choose to sub and I can't? (online BDSM group discussion, reddit.com).

While there is of course nothing wrong with concerns regarding physical and emotional abuse in BDSM as it does happen especially in regard to misunderstanding of consent (Fanghanel, 2020) academic commentaries are not actually conversing with submissive women but talking about them (Scott, 2015). The participants here also bring up issues of personal choice and touch upon the policing and regulations of [female] bodies. Deckha (2011) applies postcolonial theory on the study of BDSM, arguing that Western feminism

can fall back into imperialism by 'Othering' practices and cultures that do not follow the Eurocentric ideas of acceptable female or male behaviour:

The core issue in postcolonial feminist theory is the imposition of an imperial worldview and the attendant Othering of non-western cultural practices (Narayan, 1997a). Again, similarly, we can discern a cultural component to the S/M debate to the extent that S/M in its more than mild variety is still very much a stigmatized cultural practice constituting its practitioners as a marginalized sexual subculture (Wright, 2006). Here, too, concerns arise surrounding the ethics of those occupying a certain privileged cultural position normatively assessing and representing the practices of those occupying a marginalized one (Hopkins, 1994) (2011: 132).

I would also extend this argument to discourses on men and masculinities within BDSM – they are talked about, warned about but there also needs to be more active engagement with them. Men who participate in BDSM can also challenge existing notions of masculinities and are not necessarily inactive as they challenge issues of sexism, misogyny, and complacency within the BDSM scene. For example, the participant here expresses dissatisfaction here with what Doms are expected to be, namely an unattainable fantasy pushed forward by social expectations of what a strong Dom (or man) should be:

I wish gentle maledom was more of a thing. I get why it's not, I get that women being subby is more expected and men taking the lead is more traditional. That's not quite gentle maledom. I mean a real exploration and celebration and sexy understanding of a man dominating a woman for her submissive pleasure, that makes him feel valued and important to someone. [...] There are so many stories about powerful women who secretly get dominated or get dominated as some kind of ironic punishment, but not about a powerful woman who comes home to recharge all that by being lovingly nuzzled and dominated by her boyfriend/husband. A lot of the biggest male fantasies are made unattainable because they're pushed into this weird place where they come from total hyper masculine control and fitting that very specific image and attitude, not out of love, when they might be common in gentle femdom (online BDSM group discussion, reddit.com).

There is also a juxtaposition here to the female Domme – she is gentle, loving and firm. As evidenced by the Tumblr extract in the previous section as well, there is a tendency for practitioners to bring larger societal gender roles into BDSM. Here, the male Dom is understood as a stereotypical hyper masculine man (Vokey et al, 2013) while the female counterpart is seen through gentleness and emotion. However, the participant expresses frustration with this as his masculine and Dom performances do not fit within this and he aims to break through the stereotype, even though he himself stereotypes; note: ***I get why it's not, I get that women being subby is more expected and men taking the lead is more traditional.*** There is a tension here tied up to more traditional gender understanding. Yet, interestingly, hyper-masculinity here is understood as unnatural, unfeasible and something that is imposed negatively on men. Furthermore, this comment shows how the man is aiming to complicate the discourse on Doms as hard and sadistic and that a more gentle, even 'feminine' style of domination can be desired and performed by men. Still, the tendency to gender 'Dom' and 'Domme' through a stereotypical understanding of gender by the practitioners themselves, clearly restricts the range and diversity of performances. Therefore, while BDSM has the potential to blur the lines between feminine and masculine, practitioners can be held back because of these societal expectations on how gender needs to work. We can also see that BDSM challenges the ways that masculinities are configured and may enable people to explore their sexual and erotic selves in different ways.

This might also lead to tension between what is expected and what some men might actually crave sexually (and romantically) from BDSM, which is the case with the participant below. In feminist and BDSM writing, this type of 'gentle maledom' often gets forgotten or not mentioned, and most of the emphasis is on 'traditional' male dominance. This is unfortunate as apparently the former is way more prevalent, especially among the younger crowd of BDSM, as stated below. The following fieldwork example illustrates that in fact BDSM offers variations of the 'Dom' role and how it might not be connected to the stereotypical hypermasculinity:

I don't have any data, but what you are describing is much more common in reality than what you don't want. As in, most women, I believe, desire that gentle dom style you are describing over the more confrontational ones. I would expect you'll have a few challenges: These days, DDlg [note, 'Daddy Doms/little girls'], ageplay, "daddy"

is very common and I think a lot of people that want the gentle interaction end up in this category. This wasn't the case 5 or 8 years ago from my point of view. People that are new to kink sometimes have a sub-frenzy, they get excited and want to crank everything to 11 even if that's not what they want actually. This passes. You may still be used as a kink-dispenser, be careful. I'm most definitely not a gentle dom nor a service dom/top (that's another keyword you may want to look into) and I often encounter people that think they want my harsher version of it but they want what you are describing. (online BDSM group discussion, reddit.com)

The way Dominance is interpreted here is through the eyes of an experienced Dominant man and we can see that the way this role is understood is more complex. The Dominance style popular with younger people is in fact the gentler style, not the hypermasculine one, as the other commenter assumed. It can be argued, and this is something hypothesised by practitioners themselves, that younger people's more contemporary and contingent understanding of gender has already been reflected within BDSM, thus giving space to much more varied and individualised performances that are significantly departing from heterosexual traditional binary gender and sexuality scripts. The changes in masculinity performances among young men has been written in the literature, however, we need a similar understanding of how young men are reshaping BDSM roles as well. As Hopkins and Murray also argue (2014: 4):

a key challenge for geographers interested in masculinities has been to respond to the ways in which gender relations change over time and how younger men may no longer be able to fit quite so comfortably into categories of understanding that are now somewhat dated given their contemporary experiences of gender relations. Understandably then, a key focus of work here has been on how young men construct and contest their masculine identities and how these are informed by their own identities, such as their class, sexuality, race and ethnicity.

Similarly, Cuklanz and Erol posit that this gap in masculinity studies is due to the reign of 'hegemonic masculinity', however, 'scholars did establish that hegemonic masculinity as reflected on prime-time television was characterized by shifts that reflected the social context of the times, albeit somewhat belatedly' (2021: 546). Cuklanz and Erol's focus on masculinities in media and cinema, shows that hegemonic representations of masculinities

are indeed culture dependant and do not stay the same; in other words, what is seen as 'acceptable' masculinity currently (as in, the one pushed by popular and media discourse) is one defined by more feminist performances. Yet, there should be caution with the use of the 'hegemonic' even though Cuklanz and Erol's study adopts the term, it also shows how redundant the term is becoming.

Furthermore, in Drdová and Saxonberg's study (2021) among the differences between 'older' and 'younger' BDSM generations in the Czech Republic, the younger participants significantly depart from the gender norms that the older participants can still uphold within BDSM. They show that in the post-communist BDSM scene, older participants generally perform traditional pre-communist gender roles, especially the men. In contrast, the younger crowd have much more complex understanding of gender, sexualities and BDSM roles, thus performing much more 'westernised' and 'feminist' roles that cannot be quantified or put into boxes (Drdova and Saxonberg, 2021). I would support Drdova and Saxonberg's findings in that BDSM, clearly does allow for different dynamics of dominance (such as, caring doms, gentle femdoms, daddies) to be taking place, heightened especially by the younger generation. According to Paarnio et al (2022) specifically in Finnish context, the majority of BDSM practitioners are on the younger side which they argue is to do with 'cultural and generational differences where younger generations are more exposed to and have better access to BDSM-related media and the stigma experienced may not be as great as for the older generations' (2022: 7; also, Holvoet et al, 2017). The results from these studies support the overall premise of this thesis and provide quantitative support on the larger historical processes taking place such as the sexualisation of cultures, marked with more visibility gender fluidness, sexualities, new ways of being sexual and the transgression of binary heteronormative bonding (Attwood and Smith, 2015; Kehily, 2012). It is clear that there is an overall heightened interest among the younger generation into BDSM which can also look at younger masculinities. Nayak and Kehily (2013) have shown that the world is rapidly changing, with greater insecurities plaguing young people, who are faced with major economic and social disadvantages compared to the previous generations. In this case, young people have been forced to find new ways of expressing themselves 'through a reflexive, biographical project of the self' (2013: 50), based on the theories of individualization. While the process of individualization, where personal agency frees an

individual from more rigid social structures, Nayak and Kehily show that, although this is largely true, the theory misses the roles of class, locality, traditions and family values that can still shape young people's gender expression. In this case, it makes sense that younger men, would find it difficult to navigate more outdated social gender structures and the growing scene of BDSM has been allowing the individualization and flow of gendered expressions. Furthermore, often masculinity is still tied to cis – male bodies, thus excluding men who might not fit into this. In the following extract I am demonstrating some of the anxieties that can be experienced by younger marginalized men not fitting within the traditional masculine framework:

Anyway I am short and thin. I'm shorter than her, overall smaller. And I'm a trans guy. I'm just not your typical masculine looking dude. I've been thinking about how she'd probably be happier with a large man - tall, with big muscles and a large frame. I am so far from that. But I just wish she could sit in my lap and feel smaller like I know she wants to. Or that I could pick her up as much as I always want to. Right now she does sit in my lap, but that's about the extent of it. We're getting the psychological aspect of D/s, but I can't help but think that she'd be so much happier with someone who could give her the physical aspect too. And that if we breakup and she gets with that guy, our relationship will pale in comparison. (Online BDSM group discussion, reddit.com)

The physicality as subjective and emotional experience is not discussed enough in the BDSM literature, especially in relation to trans men. This participant discusses what dominance means to them and what they describe is quite physical – he frames the dominance through this physical subjectivity. He does not feel dominant because he worries that he does not fit with what a stereotypical dominant should look like, leading to the emotional response of fear and sadness. In fact, a slightly 'patriarchal' and heteronormative style of D/s dynamic is being discussed – the participant is worried since he is not a masculine man that his female submissive would not feel like a real submissive and he wants her to be smaller than him, more fragile than him which brings us to a very gendered physical experience; the masculine, big strong Dom paired with the small, feminine fragile sub. Unfortunately, these anxieties and worries are quite real among non – cisgender people, which can be translated into BDSM. As Bauer's (2018) research into les-bi-trans-queer BDSM communities discusses,

this 'inability' to comply with the society's vision of what bodies should look like, namely unambiguously male and female, leads 'transness' to be seen as something fraudulent, something fake and less real. In the case with the above-described experience, the man feels like he is not fitting within the assumed physicality of a 'Man', also a Dom. However, as Bauer further argues, BDSM plays give the ability to break down those socially ascribed boundaries and for trans practitioners to be able to recreate the 'Body' and the physical in new and exciting ways. As his participants point out, even if socially acceptable scripts deny their experiences and ways of performing sexuality and gender, BDSM rectifies this (Bauer, 2018). The physical is not necessarily being erased, but it is connected with the emotive and people are reconfiguring and challenging what the material means. The following extract furthermore illustrates the practitioner's observation of these generational differences as well:

I couldn't agree more. It's become much more popular and often among a younger age group. I think this is one of the main reasons why. They're conflating a gentler style of dominance with a cutesy, caring style. From the perspective of a newer submissive DDIg seems to describe that. Especially when they're more likely to see media portrayals of things like 50 Shades and think that's what the non-DDIg scene is like. You see pretty much the same thing with kitten petplay. (observed online BDSM group discussion, reddit.com).

What can be seen in the extract is the way Dominance can in fact be performed in many ways. The role itself is not static nor unchanging but reflects social processes and often the role is moulded and shaped by the person performing it. Interestingly the participant also brings up the stereotyping withing BDSM and expresses the fact that it is not as straightforward as that, since a bit 'bossier' Dom is not necessarily strict, cold, and strong.

*Yuuup. I've played with partners that have stated DDIg interests before. **I'm upfront with them that I'm not a daddy dom and would prefer not to be referred to that way, that my style of play also isn't cold, distant, and demanding the way they might have stereotyped dominants.** I'm not say that they weren't seriously into DDIg, but I also haven't encountered any problems. It also seems to be an overstated problem online. There you see people from every sphere tend to lean more into*

stereotypes more often. I generally don't encounter people like that in person very often, though. But yeah. There's definitely something to why DDlg is seemingly far more popular with the 18-24 year-old Tumblr crowd. (online BDSM group discussion, reddit.com).

Clearly there is a disconnect between how certain BDSM roles are being perceived versus how men are performing them. Thus, we can see from the examples here that not only does BDSM contain variety of roles but even each role can have multiple variations and the younger practitioners do not necessarily fit their BDSM style, as well as masculinity performances, with what the 'older generation' might have deemed as acceptable. Therefore, it can be argued that Domination within BDSM comes in many forms and different men would fit, change and 'mould' the role to suit their personality and desires. I would argue that this is both about the individuals and the cultural context of BDSM albeit the cultural context is more difficult to grasp. This means that individual dominants choose their roles based on what they want and who they are. A dominance within BDSM context thus can be anything as there is not only one right way to perform dominance (Simula, 2019), therefore the context allows the individual fluidity. That is not to say context is not important – after all a torture within BDSM is different than an actual torture as it is consented to, pleasurable and between equals (Airaksinen, 2018). However, the context does allow freedom and malleability of the performances based on the individual's desires. When it comes to the issue of masculinity and domination, I would argue, is deeply connected with the archetypal stereotypes of dominants within popular representations of BDSM. Since the word domination evokes negative connotations and is often associated with older S/M literature (*'The Story of O'*, *'Justine '11 000 whips'*, *'Venus in Furs'*). In these works admittedly the male Doms in those stories were borderline active sadists, crossing the line of assault and abuse, but modern day BDSM dominants unfortunately can often be misunderstood or painted as one-dimensional stereotypical sadists while in reality they also hold complex emotions and sadism might not even be a part of them (Hébert and Weaver, 2015). As it was seen in the previous examples, Dominance needs to be understood in more nuanced way and individual context.

Yet, this stereotyping of the dangerous masculinity/Dominance within BDSM from the popular culture overall (within Western forms of BDSM, often people's knowledge can come

from popular culture images and media's understanding of BDSM, Drdová and Saxonberg, 2020) as it can lead to, more impressionable new people into BDSM to enter toxic relationships with actual abusers masquerading as Dominants. In reality, domination within BDSM might not even be compatible with 'traditional/patriarchal masculinity' (or as some practitioners referring to it as 'toxic').

So as men we are not supposed to "feel" emotion as deeply as maybe lasses do. When I first started moving in this world I was mistakenly under the impression it would be easier to have connections/relationships/friendships with much less chance of experiencing emotional pain, how wrong I was. Sure if it's just a bit of NSA then it's not an issue but what I have found is when a real connection is made the emotional aspects can be even more intense than in vanilla. This has caught me completely by surprise. (Online fieldwork, BDSM forum, fetish.com; January 2021)

Here we can see a friction between traditional understanding of masculinity and BDSM participation. There is clearly disconnect between the two (what is expected from men and what they desire through BDSM) and one might even ask if you can ever perform true BDSM while sticking to patriarchal masculinity. BDSM as subverting patriarchy does feature within feminist and academic writing in BDSM but mainly from submissive perspective (Boltz, 2015). Here, submission is regarded as a powerful choice that requires strength to admit thus taking it away from its association with weakness, helplessness, and servitude. Then, the Dominant becomes the figure that gives the submissive everything they desire therefore distancing 'dominance' from the power. In this regard BDSM can be seen as resisting patriarchy. However, there is not much exploration on how specifically masculinities and domination within BDSM can be understood as incompatible with patriarchal expression of gender performances. What I am suggesting is that based on my data, we do not need to necessarily 'disempower' the dominant in order for BDSM to become subversive, but we need to understand that even through powerful domination the masculinities expressed can still subvert patriarchy in this specific context. As suggested by my participants, feelings of love, deep emotions and connection can happen simultaneously with domination and BDSM allows men to feel, hence why performing BDSM can aid in resisting traditional patriarchal performances of masculinities.

Following from this, a concept that is being upheld often by practitioners, is the fact that BDSM is very highly emotionally intense. Usually, the focus is on the way it affects the submissive and their ability to enter 'subspace' which is an altered psychological and emotional state achieved by submissives during plays (Pitagora, 2017). However, it can also be very emotionally taxing for the Dominant player; the 'domspace'. So how can someone achieve deep emotional connection with their BDSM partner/s, if the person performs stereotyped masculinity evoking stoicism, rationality and coldness. Going back to Scott's (2015) observation that within feminism and academic discourses actual submissive women are rarely conversed with, we can also see that much conversing has not been done with Dominant men either. What do they feel, how do they navigate the culture of BDSM, how are they reconciling masculinity and emotions? As another user remarked:

*So if it's just fantasy then we won't catch real feelings, right?! WRONG! Oh, so wrong. The fulfilment of our darkest fantasies is also a deeper recognition of our true self. So it stands to reason that a connection established over these deeper sectors of our personalities will by default be deeper than those established in the more surface-visible (dare I say it? Shallow) areas of our lives. I reckon it's akin to trauma bonding. **But instead of trauma, we're intentionally putting ourselves into this intense headspace. It can be healthy if you're both on the same page. But ending one of those relationships may require therapy to fully recover.** It is, after all, bereavement that we feel when a relationship comes to an end. The more intense the relationship, the more intense the loss. (Online fieldwork, BDSM forum, fetish.com; January, 2021*

People explain BDSM sensations through very intense emotions, and as the highlighted text shows, a BDSM dynamic involves pain (either physical or emotional) and the fantasy of trauma, putting the dynamic into the realm of active risk-taking for pleasure; of course, the 'trauma' is not real but fantasized and role played with consent. Sheppard's study (2019) discusses how BDSM can be helpful in managing chronic pain and the associated emotional response and trauma from it. Her participants reported that through extreme BDSM plays where they could control the pain being inflicted upon them, gave them momentary control of their bodies thus making them feel that they were in control of their chronic pain as well. As such, BDSM as an active and consented risk and pain taking, gave the

participants elevated levels of pleasure, therefore managing to turn pain into a positive emotion (Sheppard, 2019). Going back to the aforementioned fieldwork extract, the participant dismisses the idea of fantasy as not real. While BDSM revolves around fantasy, the sensations, the pain, and emotions are real, they are not faked but happen in a physical and/or emotional level. As seen in Sheppard's (ibid.) study, the practitioners are role-playing in a fantasy where they experience real pain in order to manage the very real emotions and pain, they experience day to day due to their chronic illness. The participant also understands and explains BDSM sensations through this realness – BDSM is not fake, it happens, and it has real emotions and sensations, hence why the participant expresses his frustrations and juxtaposes BDSM to the 'shallow' and visible areas of life. Then BDSM becomes the deep, invisible connection and emotion that sometimes cannot be explained. As such, I argue that BDSM can serve as a way of resisting patriarchal notions of masculinities and emotions associated with Dominant men. Both submissives and dominants experience heightened emotions when in a BDSM relationship and it might not be possible to keep emotions and masculinities separate.

While the emotional aspect and masculinities within BDSM is relatively understudied, emotion does feature within the literature and academic discourse on BDSM. Pliskin (2018) applies the four models of EI (Emotional Intelligence) to BDSM in order to trace how central it is to BDSM: 1) self – management, 2) self– awareness, 3) social awareness, 4) relationship management. Pliskin posits that the four models are present within BDSM and are shaping the way the practitioners understand the scene. They also argue that practitioners who apply higher levels of EI in their plays and ways of performing BDSM, leads to even more durable and heightened effects. In this case, Pliskin's study shows how central emotion is in the scene and that it can benefit the BDSMers greatly.

Going back to the sadistic Doms of the past, even the (in)famous Dom, Sir Stephen, from *'Story of O'* is not emotionless and stoic through and after his intense relationship with O; in fact, he goes through many tender moments with her and gives her what she wants, complicating the sadistically represented masculinity.

Within SM, the edge and risk play, while reminiscent of high adrenaline-based sports, is different in that the participants participate in emotional, psychological, and moral boundaries, that are in a liminal space between freedom and constraint (Newmahr, 2011).

As Newmahr (2011: 699) further posits: '[t]hese boundary transgressions at once constituted, constructed, and navigated powerful psychological and emotional spaces for both of us.'. It is clear that the participation in an intense erotic play within BDSM is marked with strong emotional response. Furthermore, Newmahr argues that especially when it comes to male domination paired with female submission where the man has to perform sadistic and painful play unto his partner, men do tend to feel emotional struggle around the ethics and morale of the situation, thus experiencing high emotional conflict around their play; they are not just passive inflictors on pain, revelling in the distress of their partner but are actively engaging with their partners and their needs and desires. Not looking and engaging with the emotional state of male Doms represents a huge gap in the academic literature. As the following examples also shows:

I think it will be wrong if men as Dom don't have any emotion. You still can be a man and show it or feel it. Most time a relationship ending with a sub I felt sad for few weeks, yes it's intense and maybe that's why it's a hard feeling. (Online fieldwork, BDSM forum, fetish.com; January, 2021)

People explain this phenomenon in BDSM through fulfilment of a deep fantasy; here the BDSM relationship is framed as something more than a casual kinky play – it is very deep, emotional, and fulfilling, and it is juxtaposed to more 'shallow' areas of life. As such, BDSM roleplaying and relationships are put on a 'higher' pedestal, compared to more casual sex activities, or swinging. The mentality that 'men cannot express emotions' is chalked to toxic masculinity, which in a way is treated as not the default masculinity, but as something negative, imposed on men:

*That's a myth linked to Toxic Masculinity. **The thing is... science. Depending on what we are doing there are obviously fetishes which turn us on.** This can pump adrenaline and other hormones. If we do impact play this can release endorphins. It's very easy for the intense feeling to reduce the world down to two people in it - the feelings, the brain chemicals, can be addictive. Break ups and [separations] can feel even deeper because you feel "no one else lights the spark" that way. (online fieldwork, BDSM forum, fetish.com; January, 2021)*

In this case, 'toxic masculinity' cannot be compatible with BDSM and is framed in terms of something that might prevent someone from experiencing the deep fulfilment, mentioned earlier. The emotional aspect of BDSM is attempted to be explained through 'science' and 'rationality' thus possibly evoking a masculinist discourse but it is entwined with feelings and emotions. Yet, this is interesting, as it can be argued that this is a consequence of the limits of emotional literacy (emotional literacy being the production of discourse on emotion, Burman, 2009) – that is can something be properly explained if you do not have the necessary frames to explain it? In other words, how do you explain a feeling that cannot be related to a linguistic expression. Here, masculinities and relationships are understood through a layered, complex discourse, mixed with a more traditionally 'feminine' aspects of feelings and subjectivity.

It is also important to note that not all people would be identifying as strictly only with one BDSM role. Just because a Dominant man might prefer to disclose only this side of his BDSM enjoyment, is not necessarily true that he would uphold Dominant values at all costs.

As an inexperienced masculine Dom who sometimes fantasizes of more 'submitting' than full submission, my greatest fear is loss of respect. As far as having a Domme that I am not in a relationship with, I would try it as it doesn't matter if she loses respect for me for acting submissive to her. But in an actual relationship loss of respect is relationship suicide as a guy. (online fieldwork, BDSM forum, reddit.com; January, 2021)

Evaluating the levels of gender and role fluidity within BDSM among men can be difficult, as some might not disclose their actual feelings for fear of humiliation or rejection, as the example shows. While Martinez's influential research (2018) into role fluidity showed that it was mainly women who expressed desire for switching, it is also possible that many men might find it easier to disclose only dominant side. It can be argued that this user is illustrating Berggren's point on sticky masculinities (2014), in that he is being drawn to a certain BDSM/masculine ideal that has been socially 'prescribed' to him. It is clear that how men feel about their BDSM roles is also connected to how they view and interact with gender. In the above scenario, the man is afraid of being laughed at and mocked in case he fails the masculinity standards, thus the BDSM role is one of domination. The way he

phrases that the loss of respect in the bedroom will end him as a 'guy' means that he is putting himself in the socially acceptable boxes (Lottie, 2019; Moffatt, 2019). However, this does not mean that the 'boxed masculinity' is the right one; it is just the one ascribed to the male body. The man's desire is for submission which can only be done with a 'casual' one time partner as he will not be judged, while the 'socially acceptable' masculinity is reserved for the 'true' relationship, illustrates the anxieties many young men might be feeling as they are made to fit within outdated structural boxes. I believe the empirical evidence I have provided here, and my argument are supporting and enhancing Berggren's notion. That is, men might find it easier to perform and be drawn to socially acceptable practices just because that is what society tells them they have to be, yet this is not all they can be (Berggren, 2014). In case with the man above, he is drawn to the domination because he feels safe doing it, as he understands that this might be the only thing he can do so to not risk ridicule. However, that is not who he really is – the masculinity emerges as 'sticky', borrowing Berggren's term, as the man is attempting to break down the boundaries that stop him by performing his submissive side in secret. Berggren argues that the sticky masculinity means that men can have it 'both ways' – performing masculinity the way they want it but also having the ability to prescribe to the chosen social expectations as they see fit. Although, I do not believe it is as simple as that because in real life, social expectations are still trapping masculinities – this man is not really able to perform masculinity the way he wants, simply because the fear of ridicule, read *repercussions*, is still there. However, BDSM is allowing this stickiness to emerge and to transform masculinities, albeit slowly but it is happening.

We can see from the above discussion how the online presence of BDSM is allowing for people to discuss their discontent with the way society still expects people to fit in preordained boxes and helps them find comfort in knowing that they are not the only ones feeling that way, but it is rather a more encompassing issue. The concepts of Dom, sub, Man are being openly challenged and reconstructed online. As such, men cannot be seen as a structured class that bestows the same privilege and power to all its members. In strict BDSM context, we should also look at the various ways of being a Dom, a submissive or a man as it is not all the same across the scene. Elliott (2020) looks at modern masculinities and the potential to move away from discussing masculinities as 'closed' and immobile. As

she argues, many young men, especially ones situated on the margins of society, are actively pushing against traditionalist discourses on masculinities (2020: 4):

A key contention of the margin-centre framework is that revolutionary potentials for openness and change in masculinities are likely to stem from the margin. In other words, it is those in the margin who foster the openness towards which men in the centre need to move. Indeed, it was with one man in this research—a queer, working-class man in Germany—that openness and egalitarian, revolutionary practices, beliefs and commitments in relation to masculinity emerged

Elliott observed that the young men in her research were often failing to live up to the standards of masculinities and in turn some were accusing feminism and women for their issues, thus creating somewhat of a vicious circle – instead of rejecting patriarchal masculine ideals, they were trying to adopt even stricter traditionalist and essentialist ideals. Yet, the masculinities could not be read as entirely closed, since there were many complex patterns and possibilities that the men were exploring in relation to their masculinities; furthermore, capitalism, economic issues and neoliberalism were identified as the issue by many of the men, consequently moving towards to more open, reflective, and malleable masculinities (Elliott, 2020).

While BDSM can be studied in terms of neoliberalism and privilege (see Chapter 5), the mainstreaming of the scene along with its vast internet presence has opened it up significantly, thus allowing wider range of activities and diversity of voices to take place. The growing sexualisation of cultures, has taken away from the closed, privileged edge BDSM once held, therefore transforming the scene into much more accessible sexual platform. As such, participants, men specifically, can find solace and comfort outside of the stricter heteronormative social expectations. As Elliott (2020) argued, revolutions start from the margin and BDSM has already started to ‘spill’ towards the centre and away from the margin.

6. 3. Conclusion

Overall, this chapter discussed how BDSM has been shaped within the online sphere, how people negotiate their performances, and understanding of what BDSM is and how gender feeds into it. While capitalist and governmental policies have been involved in the fate of many websites and apps where the sharing of pornography, kink and BDSM has been heavily regulated the online presence of the scene keeps growing and expanding, offering belonging to many people. Research on BDSM and masculinities often does not discuss young people's involvement in the scene and the way modern discourses on gender and individualism are reshaping the scene and the performances of masculinities. Major websites such as Reddit, Twitter, Tumblr and recently Tiktok, are allowing for kink and BDSM sharing and involvement, thus contributing to a fluid and easy interactions between people. Many young practitioners are leading much needed dialogues on safety withing the scene, belonging and ways to experience healthy sexual experimenting. The chapter further utilised feminist and subjective look at masculinities and the way men feel their identities are being reshaped and remoulded currently.

A specific look at dominant masculinities within BDSM, as they have been a point of contestation within the literature, gives us a nuanced and layered understanding of how men perform this identity and the problematic association between Doms and 'toxic masculinity.' While the specific examples are on men in BDSM, we can also see general friction between the way men want to perform their masculinities and what traditional patriarchal structures require from then and as such we can see resistance forming and general dialogues taking place between men.

Chapter 7

'Call me by my BDSM name!': Subverting and Experiencing gender within BDSM roles

7. 1. Introduction

This chapter will discuss and conclude the way gender roles are represented within BDSM and explore the claims that was presented in Chapter 2 Literature review – namely, gender is not important when it comes to BDSM roles and roleplays, thus placing BDSM participants outside of conventional gender system. The argument is based on Newmahr's theorization (2011) and aims to use feminist theory in order to understand how masculinities in particular are being framed and understood by the participants and whether we can talk about contingency in terms of masculinities.

The chapter continues the arguments from Chapter 6, where it was argued that dominant men within BDSM are rejecting toxic and traditional masculinities as framed by patriarchy, since dominance within BDSM is incompatible with patriarchal understanding of gender roles. This chapter builds on this and expands the conversation to also include submissive men and their experience with submission within BDSM and argues that traditional gender discourses are also incompatible with submission. The chapter looks more closely at the claims resented in the chapters *Introduction* and *Literature review*, namely that gender binary is becoming irrelevant within BDSM. I would also take the argument further and propose the position that gender roles need to be kept away from BDSM roles altogether, therefore minimizing the needless gendering of roles such as 'dominant' and 'submissive' which would bring BDSM practitioners greater freedoms exploring their desires. In this sense BDSM can prove to be a perfect example of how masculinities specifically need to be understood outside of structuralism and binary division based on hegemony. Hence, some practitioners, especially men, are leading a conversation on how detrimental and restricting traditional roles are and it is difficult to perform BDSM while trying to fit into prescribed roles.

The chapter begins by exploring the discourse on whether BDSM is inherently sexual and aims to bring light to how BDSM gets unnecessarily gendered and 'pornified', thus becoming wrongfully associated with male danger and aggression. Exploring the notion of BDSM and the perceived inherent roles of sex within kink, is important in order to then look at how gender is represented and constructed. This would be followed by the way submission and submissive men attempt to shift their representation within BDSM and society in general. I would also like to draw attention to how dominant men and dominant women are understood differently within BDSM, which is connected to how gender binary division still has a tight grip on practitioners' ways of experiencing BDSM.

7. 2. To fuck or not to fuck: BDSM, sex and the tragedy of the submissive

I would like to begin this section with a discussion on the boundaries surrounding the concepts of 'pain' and 'hurt' within BDSM, and the etiquette that happens between the consenting parties within a BDSM roleplay. The discussion would also look at the idea of studying kink through sports framework, as discussed by Weinberg (2016), followed by a discussion on BDSM as porn and the problematic inherent masculinization of the scene. I would also propose a discussion on the possibility of 'opening up' and diversifying the categories of 'dominance' and 'submission', as based on the gathered data, practitioners are challenging and presenting antagonisms with the way these BDSM roles might be understood.

This following quote is important for me as it brings a fascinating discussion on etiquette, trust and the difference between 'pain' and 'hurt'. First, we have the notion of trust coming up and being enforced. There is also an etiquette here: boundaries need to be discussed beforehand and the parties involved must consent to the activity and everything said. This is the same point made by the people in BDSM workshops I had visited – plays need to be negotiated at first before any activity taking place. In this case the partners become equals with pre-negotiated 'inequality'

*The humiliation is just fun for us, it's part of an exploration, often part of a story.
We're both massive nerds and love roleplaying and that's become a large part of our sex life. Often when I'm humiliated in more harsh terms, I'm playing a character, as is*

my partner, and the humiliation works better for me if it's something I have no serious emotional connection to. So for instance, being called a horny slut is pretty harmless because I don't care, but being called ugly or useless would really bother me. My partner understands this and has a great insight into what's okay and what isn't. We also discuss things a lot, which is part of the equality and freedom to me. Nothing is sprung on me in the heat of the moment. One of us has the idea, we discuss it, we theorise what might work or not, and we gradually try it out.

(reddit.com/BDSMCommunity)

Another thing is the nuance and context, as the participant points out. Unfortunately, writings on BDSM not always pay attention to the nuances involved within BDSM – a well-crafted sexy insult is one thing in order to achieve sexual satisfaction and pleasure; an abusive insult that might genuinely hurt the person and is taking out the roleplay from the shared space and theatrics, is a whole other. In fact, there is a difference between ‘pain’ and ‘being hurt’ which is what the participant is alluding to here. In BDSM the distinction between the two is important. As Zussman and Pierce argue, the pain within BDSM is always one of pleasure, in order ‘to achieve a altered states of consciousness’ (1998: 16). While the pain is most definitely physical, it is also symbolic and ritualistic, and the subs/masochists seek it in order to achieve this mental state of bliss (Zussman and Pierce, 1998). Similarly, Airaksinen also writes, ‘the bottom reports delight as well as strong pleasurable feelings and sensations. In this case, delight and pleasure are substituted for horror, mental pain, and physical suffering, although the bottom can also report unadulterated pain. Hence, the pain–pleasure pair is freely reversible’ (2018: 2). In this sense, while the pain receiver is physically wounded, the pain becomes a substitute for pleasure. The pain does not ‘hurt’ the submissive/masochist, it pleasures them. So as the participant above explains, being humiliated and pained as a pleasure is not the same as being hurt in reality. The submissive is not a victim here but the receiver of altruism by the dominant (Zussman and Pierce, 1998) because pain is what they crave. However, the etiquette must be fulfilled – this is why the pre–negotiations between the two players are so important. The participant continues:

As for the rest of my life? I think it's consistent. My partner can say certain things to me because I agreed to it. Other people can't, because I haven't agreed to it. I set my own boundaries, with my partner and everyone else, and if they're not respected

then it's not a person I want in my life. I mean. I trained kickboxing a lot of years. I got punched in the face a lot. The people, mostly men, who punched me in the face were people who respected me, who respected my boundaries, and would always stop immediately if I asked them to. Hell, one guy once started crying when he gave me a nosebleed. I let them punch me in the face because we had the right equipment, training and understanding for it, but I would never let some random stranger punch me in the face. No one thinks I'm hypocritical or weak for that. It was recreational like bdsm. What's the difference? (observed discussion, reddit.com/BDSMCommunity, November, 2021)

Here we have more nuanced discourse on when hitting someone is acceptable - in a shared contact sports such as martial arts women would get hit as they have consented to the practice and this is the price to pay for creating an art and learning something (Weinberg, 2016). How is BDSM different then? The short answer is it is not, which is pointed out by the commenter herself. However, in order to explain why BDSM is treated differently than other leisure activities involving pain, as well as physical and emotional intensive labour, we would need to introduce the discourse on 'sex' and 'pornography'. I would present the argument that the idea of 'sex' can still be treated as taboo and in the realm of danger.

Framing sex activity through sports framework is not unheard off and has been discussed by Weinberg but mainly in legal terms (2016). Another article that compares S/M with sports, that I would like to discuss in order to trace the history of BDSM and its comparison to sports as well as the social anxieties surrounding this, is Hannah's *Sex is not Sport* (2001) which holds a very negative view on the sadomasochistic practice, and it is the complete opposite of Weinberg. Here Hannah argues that violence in sports is expected and confined, thus it is not escaping the sport itself, unlike with S/M which can be used to perpetuate violence against vulnerable people, and it can be used as a legal defence by abusers (in other words, sexual abusers can always claim in court that their victim consented to rough sex and 'rape play' as part of consensual S/M activities). Hannah, who aims to challenge abusive men and masculinities in her legal work, interestingly uses a very Right-wing patriarchal and conservative view on masculinities in order to justify the sports violence: 'I argue that the sports exception is illustrative of the male heterosexual acceptance of violence in the context of competition and fair play. Violence, competition and the

construction of manhood are intrinsically linked' and this followed by 'the law has at least served as a symbolic and practical check on natural human aggression in general, and violent male competition, in particular' (2001:245; 256). Here masculinity is constructed by Hannah as something inherently violent that men need to express hopefully in a healthy way like sports. The construction of manhood presented by Hannah is very dangerously close to 'boys will be boys' framework which for Hannah is only acceptable if not related to sex. She contends that S/M activities and sport violence is not the same because: 'the argument that sex is a sport has the unintended consequence of allowing people, mostly men, to use violence to satiate their sexual desires, redefining civilized masculinity within a sexual context.' (2001: 256). What constitutes as 'civilised masculinity' is not very clear but what is clear is that Hannah utilises a very patriarchal essentialist view on gender where men are almost framed as animals and savages and women would ultimately be the victims. However, more dangerously, Hannah agrees with violent sports which are just a natural consequence of masculinities for her. Despite research showing that within sports clubs and societies, especially in university settings, rape culture and sexual violence exist almost unchecked (McCray et al, 2021; Frintner and Rubinson, 1993), this is conventionally omitted by Hannah. In fact, S/M becomes a sole scapegoat accused of not only perpetuating violence against partners but also more long-term issues such as HIV and AIDS infections, as well as other diseases that would go unchecked if S/M becomes legally acceptable. There is a tone of homophobia here, especially when she mentions that now BDSM is becoming very widespread among middle class educated people, and not at all just performed by 'gays, lesbians and bisexuals' (2001: 243). The implication, I would argue is that, once a sexual practice transcends boundaries and becomes associated with heterosexual middle-class people (and women specifically), suddenly it is a problem, and we need to save them. The outrage here is hypocritical – if one is worried about the dangerous effects of BDSM on people, why not focus on it before it spills into 'acceptable society'? Why not worry about the safety of the 'gays, lesbians and bisexuals'? While this article is over 20 years old, the debates surrounding BDSM and legality are continuing. Christopholus (2020) also puts arguments against BDSM, however, she presents much more layered and careful discourse by claiming that, 'The recent press coverage of British backpacker Grace Millane's murder trial has served as a shocking reminder of the prejudicial treatment of young women, and the unwillingness of the media and the public to distinguish between

consensual 'rough sex' and sexual violence.' (ibid, para.1). She also argues that consent to rough sex does not equal consent to murder, therefore BDSM defence winning in court is not often recurring.

For Bennett (2021) the idea that legalising BDSM would lead to abusers to use it as a defence mechanism is a 'bogus' argument that misunderstands the law and legal proceedings. In fact, the argument relies on a premise that is 'untenable, illogical and irrelevant.' (2021: 180). This so – called bogus argument comes and goes as BDSM fluctuates between fame and oblivion; in the early 2000s when Hannah's article was published S/M was getting momentum in popular culture and mainstream society, which happens again currently, and the argument has resurfaced once more, used as a cautionary tale (Bennett, 2021). Even Hannah eventually concludes that in reality, an actual consenting BDSM encounter would not end up in court to begin with and the burden of proof on consent would be on the defendant not the victim, yet she relentlessly refuses to compare BDSM with sports and urges that keeping S/M encounters illegal in the eye of law needs to happen to keep people safe. In other words, there are no tangible reasons why we should not use a sports framework to gain better understanding of consent of pain within BDSM.

Weinberg's study on the legal differences between martial arts and sports consent vs BDSM sexual consent shows there is still a wider discomfort associated with violence during sex, which is still legally in grey area. While consensual injuries and violence in sports are expected and even encouraged, the same cannot be said about sexual activities where even the mentioning of violence makes the sexual activity immediately criminalized both legally and socially/morally (Weinberg, 2016). My data largely supports Weinberg's conclusions; however, I would like to present a discussion on why exactly certain types of sex are still held as morally ambiguous, thus making them unacceptable to some feminist circles and society at large.

In order to explain why BDSM is seen as different to sports and other violent leisure activities and to shed light on the aforementioned participants' observations, we need to take into account the fact that BDSM is a sexual activity and often involves active *violent/dangerous* sex often associated with the realm of pornography. While sex and art can be connected, often the former is seen as something less, vulgar and dangerous. Sex can only be seen as classy and artful when it is connected to the realms of erotica,

heteronormativity, heterosexuality, purity and innocence (Roach, 2018). In Chapter 2 Literature review, the difference between 'pornography' and 'erotica' was touched upon in order to showcase the classism and elitism associated with the concepts, as well as the way they are treated differently within academic literature on sex. Often pornography is regarded as a leisure activity that men consume and it is geared towards men. This is captured by Tucker (2009) who argues that male masturbation for example is often framed as something negative since it relies on visual stimuli involving the objectification of female bodies, unlike female masturbation which is encouraged since it is seen as relying much more on actual objects (e.g. vibrators) and erotic fiction. In this case pornography is regarded as seedy, dangerous, masculine pastime activity as opposed to the more feminized, 'artful' and fluffy erotica geared at women. Pornography is generally seen as that homogenous, generalised and largely undefined category that is always kept apart from healthy sexuality, art and erotic works (Needham, 2018). If we look back at Rubin's outer vs inner charmed Circle (1984), pornography is still entrapped in the outer limits of unwanted, pathologized and ostracized sexuality which exists in binary opposition to the socially accepted healthiness. When it comes to works of erotic fiction, they are generally accepted because even though there is usually plenty of sexual scenes, they always end with love and relationships, they are seen as 'classy' and 'artful' unlike the 'trashy' pornography; this presents the erotica sex as connected to love and Eros figure and everything opposed to love must be dehumanizing (Roach, 2018). Thus, the erotic fiction consumer is easier accepted and celebrated, as opposed to the pornography user who is 'othered' and he (usually a 'he') has to be told how damaging he is being by engaging in a damaging behaviour (Dines, 2010; McKee, 2018).

Unfortunately for BDSM, the practice is usually being connected to pornography. For example, Hong (2022) traces how radical feminist pushback against BDSM connects BDSM with pornography and violence and states that: '[s]ince pornography includes the representation of sadomasochism and various role plays, it can be an umbrella term for BDSM practice.' (ibid: 12). Since pornography is masculinized, in the sense that it is regarded as a male activity enjoyed by men, BDSM would be associated with the same, thus making it masculinized platform enjoyed by men and used as an excuse to abuse. Pornography framed as masculinised activity, is seen in this quote by Dines (2010: 17): '[t]he anti-porn

slide show produced in the 1980s had a huge impact on me. It shifted the way I thought about men, masculinity and sexual violence because it showed me, in stark detail, how porn users think about women.’ Here it is very clear that the porn user is regarded as male and Dines connects pornography with masculinity and violence.

In this case, it does not matter how many times women who perform BDSM share how non – harmful it is for them, as long as the ontological position of BDSM is understood as one of masculinized pornography, the scene would not be accepted by feminist theory. The original commentor made a good point by comparing a violent and extreme leisure such as martial arts with another extreme violent leisure such as BDSM – there should not be a difference, but there is and that difference is the sex involved with BDSM, often regarded as pornographic.

In fact, we need to look at how BDSM can be independent from penetrative sex and widen the definition of ‘sex’. I have argued previously that the literature often discusses penetrative sex and its association with genitals, thus providing a very narrow definition of what sex can be and putting it into a stringent phallogentric heterosexual cis dynamic (Karioris and Alan, 2017). In reality, newer academic discourse tends to highlight the difference between ‘kink’ and ‘sex’ and aims to discover greater nuance between the two. Sprott et al (2021) argue that there is a notable complexity and diversity in the way various practitioners understand the relationship between sex and kink. While some of their participants make a distinction between the two, ultimately the consensus is that kink activities make the sex better:

For them, kink was sometimes a prelude to sexual activity, or kink added “spice” to concurrent sexual activity, or kink and sex were both expressions of power exchange and/or intimacy, or kink and sex both involved an overall erotic, connecting energy that was similar but that manifested differently (in BDSM behavior versus in sexual behavior) as an intimate encounter unfolded. (2021: 725).

As Sprott et al point out, even though sex and kink are connected based on the participants’ information, the two can be framed in separate terms and experienced differently and it is individually based, thus providing a complex and often unclear relationship. It also seems as if kink and sex are interconnected despite being experienced in different terms with kink

most likely being the cataclysm to good sex. The following extract both supports and adds to Sprott et al arguments by attempting to add context and widen the definition of sex, as well as pointing out the wrongful assumptions of kink inherently equating sex:

No, I don't consider it inherently sexual. I think it's context related. Everything can be sexual or not sexual depending on context. For example, let's talk about kissing. I don't consider giving a partner a quick peck goodbye in the morning to be sexual. If I was kissing a partner while attempting to arouse them (caressing their cock, or playing with their nipples), then the kiss is sexual. No activity is inherently sexual to me. I consider kink to be the same. When I do pickup play with people, one question is always "Do you include/need sex in your scenes?" This means, sex is an optional element to a scene, and not inherent. For some people, kink and sex are inherently linked. For others, they're separate activities. I'm of the latter group. Nude and tied up: for me it's not sexual, unless the rigger makes it sexual. Nudity is natural and not sexual to me. Being tied up isn't sexual either. I understand some people may look at the scene and see it as sexual, but that's their experience of it. As the person experiencing it, it's not sexual to me until someone adds sex and the scene becomes sexually charged. (reddit.com, BDSMCommunity, discussion, Nov. 2021)

Here, kink and sex are not only experienced differently, they are different and not mutually inclusive. One can exist without the other, and a BDSM role play does not need a sexual activity to succeed. But the more important point here highlighted by the participant, is that for them kink is inherently non – sexual unless framed that way by the people experiencing it. In this sense kink, as well as other sexual ambiguous activities (such as nudity and kissing) need to be looked at through cultural and contextual lenses. Going back to Foucault's argument, that '[w]e know very well what all those people [S/M practitioners] are doing is not aggressive; they are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body-through the eroticization of the body' (1998: 165). In this regard, BDSM can transcend sex, and more importantly genital sex, as sex is not necessary in order to achieve pleasure. Furthermore, BDSM has its own contextual understanding of certain symbols: being tied, kissed or whipped does not automatically correspond to the erotic and the sexual. As the participant discusses, being bounded during a BDSM scene can be just that, being bounded. And this is enough to achieve the pleasure and content. Here we can see how we should

remove the 'masculinized' phallogocentric sex discourse away from BDSM and the way people experience pleasure. Despite the 'masculinization' of BDSM, I would keep arguing that gender becomes complicated and does not always make sense in conventional ways, which was presented as the main hypothesis of this thesis. This means that at times gender fades away and other narratives replace it, yet at other times BDSM practices can become highly gendered. Based on my findings, practitioners often attempt to look at BDSM roles outside of gender categories and try not to put conventional gender roles within their plays necessarily. For example:

Hi all. I just wanted to get some opinions on this. I (F/26) am a pretty masculine queer femme. My sub calls me both daddy and mommy, just kind of depending on the mood. Our cis-male daddy dom friend thinks that women cannot be called "daddy", which my sub and I think is ridiculously closeminded. What do you guys think about calling a masc femme "daddy"? Seems pretty normal to me! (observed discussion, reddit.com BDSMCommunity, November 2021)

The practitioner here expresses the discontent with the unnecessary gendering of the BDSM terms. It seems that on occasion even when the Femme technically presents as masculine, her role is still gendered and coded to be 'feminine' because her body is read as 'female'. In this case, the male Dominant categorizes and expects the role of the 'Dominant' to be gendered based and corresponding to the sex/gender of the person performing it. It is clear here that the term 'daddy' is also being taken away from its literal meaning (a male parent figure) and it is made to be a de-gendered symbol of protection interchangeable with the word 'mommy'. The participant is attempting to break down the literal heteronormative meaning of these words, yet her friend tries to keep the status quo. The discussion continues:

My ex fiancée/Domme was always Daddy, Sir or Master. She uses female pronouns everywhere else, but scenes were always male/masculine honorifics because it helped her get into the right headspace. Do you OP. If it makes you happy and comfortable, screw what anybody else says or thinks (reddit.com/BDSMCommunity)

However, while the above extracts argue in favour of keeping gender stereotypes away from the roles themselves, a casual 'masculinization' still occurs. The participant informs us

that his Domme wants to be called 'sir' and 'daddy' to help her get into the headspace which means that this person associates 'dominance' with masculinity and cannot perform it while being regarded as a woman. Anthropological feminist research has documented instances of women having to adapt and use more 'masculine' persona and language in order to combat powerlessness especially in masculine dominated cultures and situations (Sa'ar, 2007). However, I would argue that this is not a BDSM problem in itself and needs to be understood in a larger patriarchal context of internalised gender attitudes. It is clear that BDSM practitioners are trying to break away and complicate the discourse on gender and BDSM roles, yet the change might need to come from the outside as well as from the inside. As Elliott argued (2020), changes in masculinities might be coming from the marginalised sexual cultures, inspiring changes into the mainstream, central society. BDSM is already posing important discourses and critiques on the way gender is understood which reflects with Elliott's arguments. However, as we saw with the above examples, notions underpinning the central or mainstream society can also influence the margins. To clarify the point, the male friend's understanding of gender and BDSM roles is possibly directly influenced by patriarchal heteronormative ideas of how gender works and relies on socially acceptable gender roles and these ideas are applied to BDSM. Yet, the female Domme is challenging this and attempting reconstruction of how we understand gender within BDSM. The following example also touches upon some of the issues that can occur when traditional gender roles get applied to the BDSM roles:

I am a man but hesitate to call myself a Dom or domin[a]nt, I like some of the aspects of domination during sex, but it carries with it negative connotations of creepy men with little a[p]periciation for consent, them[e]s that are consistent with larger understanding of masculinity. Here we have another discourse on how society's narrow definition of masculinities is not compatible with BDSM nor with this person's life and identity. It is vivid that the practitioner is aware and frustrated by the ways gender norms are understood and aims to challenge them but ultimately might not have the means to do so. As discussed in the previous chapter, it is also clear that often-societal gender norms of masculinity might not be compatible with BDSM. He continues:

I myself am not happy with societies narrow definition of masculinity. I think it's harmful, almost 4/5 of successful suicides are men, linked heavily with societies

distain of men that fail to live up to its standards of masculinity. I think it's restrictive, men should never show interest in feminine pursuits. Unfortunately I see a lot of [e]nforcement of traditional masculinity for male dominates among the BDSM community, especially among female submissive, sorry to come down hard on you like this, and I certainly can only speak for my own experiences. Most of the girls I have been involved with in a sexual capacity have with the same breath, decried men as pigs only interested in sex, and chastised me for not being aggressive enough initiating sex. (And outright refusing to do it themselves)TLDR, I like rough sex, but hate the attitude that male Doms are coin operated dominance dispensers.
(Reddit.com/BDSMCommunity discussion, June, 2021)

While he is touching on some important aspects of how society views men (the centre), ultimately casual misogyny seeps in since he eventually blames women once again for the dominant demands in BDSM that he thinks are toxic. While the participant is complaining from the overreliance on outside gender norms into BDSM, he also fails to recognise that it works both ways – submissive women in this case are allowed to have a sexual preference without it being attached to real life ‘toxic’ gender notions. That is, a submissives can enjoy the thrill of a ‘dangerous’ Dom/me without having to fear for their life. The following participants offers this as an answer:

The stereotypical representations of masculinity are only one way to be a man. Likewise, there's no one way to be a dominant, regardless of stereotypes [...] It might also help to try to divorce your concept of domination from gender roles, or even gender itself, and instead attach it to you, your interests and what makes you personally feel dominant. Not only do expectations around those representations of, and messages about "traditional masculinity" harm men who fall outside of that narrow box, but it can make communicating about desires and consent difficult for everyone. (reddit.com/BDSM group discussion, June, 2021)

What the participant highlights here is how unnecessary, detrimental even is connecting gender to BDSM roles and using them as interchangeable and connected. Instead, the idea is to tailor the experience and BDSM roles to one’s full individuality and not just some narrow gender identity. In this case, Dominant men for example, can create dominant roles that are independent of any masculine identity but entirely based off who they are outside

of gender. The contingency of 'Dominance' is also highlighted and it is discussed how wide and diverse it can be so it might be inherently difficult to tie it to 'gender'. While gender in itself is a diverse concept, it does not mean that it can be useful to express the ideas of 'dominance' and 'submission'. It is obvious that people might be even uncomfortable and self-conscious of conflating the two, like the previous participant is. Alan (2019) appeals at the use of queer theory in order to complicate how masculinities and male sexualities are studied. As he writes: 'as should be evident, queer theory remains a theoretically rich way to explore the complexities of men and masculinities precisely because it moves the discussion away from the "hegemonic" and towards alternative practices, identities, and desires inherent to men and masculinities. Masculinities are not static, and to study the fluidity of masculinities requires a theoretical perspective that relishes the slipperiness of identity' (ibid: 80, 81). In this case, I believe that BDSM is allowing us to see how 'slippery' indeed identities are.

Another point made by the participant that I would like to discuss is this:

As an aside: There's nothing inherently hypocritical about a woman who abhors men so fixated on sex that consent falls by the wayside, but whom still enjoys rough sex, as rough sex should be mutually consensual regardless of who initiates it.

What the participant highlights here is that even though women can perpetuate patriarchy and 'toxic' masculinity, it is important to note that in BDSM context the submissive would of course pair themselves with dominant type of people based on their sexual and BDSM desires. Thus, it is incorrect to label submissive women as people who might also perpetuate the same dynamic in their everyday lives. A submissive is allowed to consent to a certain dynamic in a sexual context without having to be victim blamed and subjected to abuse outside of the BDSM dynamic. Capturing this nuance is important and as argued by Cascalheira et al (2021: 2) '[n]egotiating consent in 24/7 BDSM may be like discussing risk in other leisure pursuits.' Agreeing to specific sexual related risks should always be limited to a certain context and it should be treated the same way as risk involvement in any other sphere.

Cascalheira et al are also conceptualising BDSM as a scene that is important for the participants' sexualities, personalities, identities and as a serious leisure pursuit since it

involves ‘the need for perseverance, the opportunity for careers, efforts in the acquisition of knowledge, durable benefits, a unique ethos and personal identification’ (2021: 8).

However, in their study gender was not determined to be of much importance either; BDSM is mainly related to one’s unique personal identification which supports the above findings as well. My data also supports the BDSM gender theorization by Simula and Sumerau (2019: 463) who are arguing that:

In so doing, respondents resisted cultural depictions of men and/or males as dominant and women and/or females as subordinate by highlighting situations that contradicted such expectations. Rather than gender, these respondents (in interviews and on discussion boards) emphasized individual personalities and styles to conceptualize BDSM as a practice wherein dominance and submission—rather than gender identities or expectations—took center stage.

It is, however, important to note the difference between men who are submissive and men who are dominant. As Simula and Sumerau (2019) note submissive men can conform to more stereotypical masculinities and frame submission in terms of strength, perseverance, and self – control. I would present the hypothesis that submissive [straight] men can be more likely to use stereotypical and traditional understanding of gender performance in order to avoid ridicule as submission in men even within BDSM can be treated as a joke thus making dating and finding dominant women difficult. Florencio’s (2020) work on ‘pig’ masculinities (a term reserved for bottoms in the male gay scene who are uninhibited and performing more hardcore kinks and sexual acts), shows that the submitted masculinity, the one the ‘pig’ performs, is not necessarily weak or literally submissive. Instead, the pig is seen as strong, as brave and masculine for being able to take the humiliation, pain and high intensity of the sex acts: ‘I’m gonna take it like a man...I fucking love getting it in my fucking ass...and—like—taking it like a pig [...] You could be a fucking top and be a big old fucking queen [...] You fuck me like a man, I’m gonna take it like a man!’ (2020: 2). The pig here becomes a hero, someone who is not afraid to admit what they want and how they want it. There is an interesting egalitarianism here – neither the bottom nor the top are all powerful but both can share characteristics of strength and powerlessness.

Inserting a dominant language and construction of submission might effectively lower the ridicule and make their acceptance easier. In addition, it might be easier for dominant men

to be distancing themselves from traditional masculinities as they already hold more power and are the norm in BDSM, therefore they have nothing to prove as their masculinities are not questioned. This can be illustrated with the following example:

I suspect that a lot of 100% sub men falsely label themselves as switches due to lingering shame from not conforming to vanilla expectations of male dominance. I was contacted repeatedly by a long-time sub who labeled himself as a switch and explained on his profile that, while he had been active as a sub since the 1980s, he was now exploring his Dom side, and strongly preferred submissive women. And yet: Every single one of his pics was of him engaged in some form of submissive play--being pegged, being beaten, in chastity, being queened, etc., etc., etc. And every single one of the fetishes on his fetish list was a bottom type of fetish--every single one. Not to mention that he's contacting a Domme for a play session. Situations like this generate so much cognitive dissonance that it's hard not to get...um...annoyed. Moreover, a man with his amount of experience who is deliberately, and quite ineptly, attempting to hide his real desires is not a...um...compelling prospect as a play partner. (Fetlife.com, Online forum discussion, access: September, 2020)

As the above extract shows, the Domme commenting is explaining the issues that many subs might be experiencing as there is still leftover shame from 'mainstream' treatment of gender – using the switch label does leave a wider room for interpretation and higher possibility to find a larger variety of partners. Yet, it seems that the insecurity of the man in his own desires is what is putting off the prospective partner not the submission per se. Hébert and Weaver (2015) argue that submissives within BDSM can face stigma and ridicule due to their position; in their specific examples they posit that specifically submissive women face difficulties due to their willingness to 'submit' to men, however, the argument needs to be extended to include submissive men as well. Yet, while both are stigmatized, it is for different reasons. A submissive woman is blamed for perpetuating patriarchy, while a submissive man is blamed for failing patriarchy. Therefore, submissive men are regarded as failing their socially conditioned patriarchal masculinity (Simula and Sumerau, 2019). As Green posits (2008: 25) 'despite their democratic potential [erotic worlds], these sites are simultaneously arenas of sexual exploration and systematic stratification'. He further argues (2008; 2011) that markers such as class, race, sexuality, age, nationality etc, are spilling from

the larger society into the erotic worlds. As argued in Chapter 4, BDSM can slip into neoliberal and capitalist ideals, with practitioners who are middle to upper class, white, physically attractive and falling within socially acceptable behaviour, are regarded as more appropriate partners within BDSM and are attributed higher erotic capital. Erotic capital as argued by Green (2008; 2011) are the qualities that an individual possesses that make them attractive to someone. Within BDSM specifically, an attractive, well off, kind and sexy Dominant man would have higher chances of finding a submissive than a Dom who is less attractive, socially awkward and looking like a pervert. However, it is more difficult to apply this to submissive men, as it seems they already hold a lower erotic capital compared to Dominant men. While it can be true that a confident, handsome, submissive man who holds a high social and erotic capital outside of BDSM can find partners easier than a submissive who is seen as weak and pathetic, it seems that this is rare as well. For example:

Dating as a submissive man seeking a dominant women is very hard and I feel like no one talks about it. Most days it feels like I'll never be with a dominant woman unless i pay for it. It feels like this is the hardest dating pool to be in and no one ever talks about it. FWIW, I'm not one of those guys that fetishizes dominant women (fuck that). I'm reasonably attractive and desirable.. and I've done all the hard work of accepting who I am (which took years because is society's eyes, being a submissive man is one of the scariest things) ...at the end of the day, I'm stuck with the harsh reality that I'll most likely have to settle. The worst part is, even tho I'm submissive,, I'm still saddled with all of society's heteronormative bullshit about how men should act in a dating context. I am NOT a gallant, hyperconfident, highly masculine man, so WHY am I expected to act like one? And on the flip side, I don't want to act like a fucking worm just to get somebody's attention. I am highly assertive, self confident, and emotionally healthy thanks to years of hard work, but when I act as such, it feels like false advertising...(Online BDSM community discussion, reddit.com; access: June, 2021)

Even though the submissive man here acknowledges their erotic capital, the fact that he is submissive and also a man who does not fit within society's standards is diminishing his chances to find a partner. What is interesting here, is that the participant is not only bringing our attention to the fact that men might find it difficult to fit within their prescribed

masculine identities, it is also the fact that what is considered 'submissive' should also expand and give space to alternative ways of performing it. While, as previously shown people are willing to change what a 'Dominant' is and divorce it from gender, not much has been done in terms of male submission. As argued previously, submission often has been understood through 'strength', assertiveness and perseverance which has directly been tied to people's genders and role in society (aka, women in order to not be blamed as failing feminism and men to not get blamed for failing their prescribed masculine roles) (Khan, 2018; Jackson, 2016, Rivoli, 2015). However, based on the above participant's response, one does not need to present in terms of strength and confidence if this is not part of who they are; similarly, one also does not need to perform a literal submission that makes them feel uncomfortable (*'a fucking worm'*). So, the role of 'submission' then needs to take into account the individuality of the person outside of gender and outside of what is expected from the concept of 'submission'. This then leads us to unwrap the discourse on whether BDSM roles need to be fully taken away from the notion of 'gender' and whether 'gender' is becoming obsolete within the scene. The following section would be looking if this is the case and how some BDSM practitioners are opening the conversation.

7. 3. The 'messiness' of masculinities and gender in BDSM: 50 Shades of freed indeed

The literature and this thesis's findings have illuminated that while gender obviously exists within BDSM and often can be tied to the BDSM roles being performed (female subs and male Doms), participants are trying to avoid generalisations based on gender and are pushing against static gender representation. Moreover, the findings concern the representations of masculinities and the continuous issues of the structural theorizations of the masculinities and men studies. BDSM in this regard has proven a useful example of how constraining and outdated discourses on masculinities are becoming the era of sexualisation of cultures.

My findings contribute to the literature (Bauer, 2017; Childs, 2016; Califia, 2000) and highlight the importance of placing BDSM outside of binary gender system. While Newmahr (2011) examined how at specific BDSM community participants are choosing to live outside

of gender, I would take this further to present an interpretation on how pre-conditioned societal gender roles hold BDSM back and being trapped by these gendered conditions might be largely incompatible with the scene and practitioners are actively trying to navigate that. However, I am not arguing that currently gender as a concept does not exist within BDSM and that it is inconsequential. As a feminist scholar I believe there is a need for the literature to approach gender more carefully within BDSM, but the discourse needs to be opened up and diversified; in their words, it is not that gender in itself is unimportant or irrelevant within the scene. The idea of 'de – gendering' is of course not new and theoretically has been proposed by some feminist theorists such as Lorber (2000: 80) who argued that:

I suggest, is that gender divisions still deeply bifurcate the structure of modern society. From a social constructionist structural gender perspective, it is the ubiquitous division of people into two unequally valued categories that undergirds the continually reappearing instances of gender inequality I argue that it is this gendering that needs to be challenged by feminists' (2000: 80).

What Lorber discusses here is that society overall needs to be de – gendered if we want equality. Her position is quite radical and might not necessarily be fully achievable. We must be very careful when talking about de – gendering because on one hand, we do not want to take away from people's identities and there should not be anything wrong wanting to participate in a gender of choice and to look 'feminine' or 'masculine'. At the same time, as Lorber (1999) points out we also should not keep reproducing strict gender categories, as this would keep excluding people that might never fit into those. NB people have been discussing issues of marginalization and unacceptance, trans people that have not undergone sex change surgeries and are not 'passing' can face horrible stigmas both by the trans community and society at large, simply because they might not fit into the binary gender categories (see Anderson et al, 2020; Billard, 2019; Truszczynski et al, 2022).

When it comes to BDSM context, it needs to be kept in mind that trans and cis men and women, as well as gender fluid and NB people would be having very differing experiences within the BDSM scene and would be facing different difficulties and stigmas which has already been discussed in previous analysis chapters (specifically the transphobic backlash trans people can be facing within BDSM). What needs to happen instead is not gendering

BDSM roles and practices as this stops them being performed and enjoyed by diverse audiences. I believe that studies of BDSM need to consider this more carefully when discussing gender within BDSM, which would then help us better understand how men and masc presenting people are experiencing BDSM in particular. Hammers (2015) for example, has shown that BDSM practices can help transmen to feel more in control of their bodies and to feel more masculine. At the same time, the 'masculinization' of the body is not coming from inflicting or receiving the pain, but from affirmation of the fact that BDSM does take away from the genitals because it involves a full body experience. What is interesting in Hammers research is that while BDSM in itself might not be gendered it can still help some men find their own identities and feel comfortable with their gender, especially members of the queer community who are facing challenges and unacceptance of their bodies in society.

In fact, BDSM participants are conscious of the ways patriarchal gender system can be damaging especially in a high-risk sexual culture and as such it could be argued that BDSM roles will have to be placed outside gender system. As discussed, previous in the chapter, BDSM itself can get gendered and 'pornified' due to mainstream perception of what BDSM is and it can be regarded as a male sexual activity used to abuse women in the guise of a sex positive kink culture, which has been discussed in the literature (Banerjee et al, 2017). Unfortunately, this can lead to problematic behaviour, which has been discussed within BDSM. For example:

I think phrases like "the sub has all the power" in mdom/fsub relationships come from a well intentioned place. I think gender definitely plays a role and that emphasizing the idea that subs still have agency and power is really important. But I think it comes with its own problems.

I think that saying "the sub has all the power" kind of undermines the idea that doms and tops have limits and that they also may need to safeword. And in the context of a maledom relationship, I think it can also enforce the idea that men are always eager and willing to have sex, which can be really harmful to a lot of men. (reddit.com, online BDSMCommunity, discussion, access: May 2021)

The idea of the sub being in control is meant to empower the subs and it is specifically used in maledom relationships involving female subs. As the practitioner points out, this can be a good way of making BDSM seem less problematic and it can help submissive people to come to terms with their identity easier and help them feel secure and safe. The literature on BDSM treats this trope as a general positive (Khan, 2018) without much understanding of how this can affect [negatively] the dominant partner. Since dominants are the ones 'in power' so to speak, the way they feel and their ability to consent and withdraw consent has largely been ignored. Often the fact that both 'dominance' and 'submission' are in a way abstract sexual roles and not the literal manifestations of the concepts, gets forgotten. 'Dominant' within BDSM is a role someone undertakes, just like being a submissive. There is not a literal power manifested, but carefully negotiated and scripted power exchange (Foucault, 1998) and it has to be regarded in that context. So why would the submissive be given all the power? In a poststructuralist sense, power does not work in that way; power cannot be held but transmitted and in a BDSM context, the power is voluntarily given up by the submissive and exchanged. As Foucault (1998) argued, this is why BDSM (then known as S/M) is fascinating when studying power and it fits perfectly with the Foucauldian power model.

Going back to the aforementioned extract, the participant argues that not only are 'consent' and 'safe words' used by everybody participating in the role play, but they are often forgotten to be applied to the dominant partner. Consequently, as it is pointed out, one person holding the power goes against safe BDSM participation and it can lead to dominants being seen as always consenting and ready to play. This is problematic on two levels – the more obvious level is where it seems that dominants are not given the ability to consent and potentially being opened to abuse (this is unfortunately common in femdom relationships with male subs, and it has been recorded by academics such as Lindemann, 2011). On another level it also tells us how problematic the gendering of consent is and its association with submissives only in BDSM context. Here the participant says that the problematic idea of men always being eager is enforced and I would like to unpack this more.

Assumptions about men being obsessed with sex and always ready and eager for it has roots in patriarchy and essentialist, heteronormative sex divide (Saguy et al, 2021). As argued (Ólafsdóttir and Kjaran, 2019) the essentialist idea of men having innate animalistic

sexual desires they cannot control hurts everyone, not just men. On one hand, men seen as always ready to have sex can open them up to sexual abuse and harassment – after all, if men are always on the prowl for sex, they cannot say no, since it is in their nature to want sex at all times (Gunnarsson, 2017). On the other hand, this also leads to male entitlement and [heterosexual] sex being regarded as a phallogentric activity that is done unto women thus making women the victims of it which is a point of contestation within feminist sex debates ([see Literature Review](#)).

This conundrum is related to the old binary patriarchal understanding of the roles of men and women. Men being hunters, chasers, virile, strong and sexually aggressive as opposed to women who are the gatherers, the mothers, the virgins, the prey. These heteronormative essentialist concepts unfortunately are applied to this day due to patriarchal and systemic misogynistic oppressive structures (Gunnarsson, 2017). This is why often when discussing ‘consent’ it is usually to do with women’s ability to consent and men’s need to respect that ‘thus, the heterosexual script in terms of sexual acts draws attention to the underlying heterosexual gender norms in relation to power’ (Ólafsdottir and Kjaran, 2019: 5) which is also very heteronormative. In BDSM ‘consent’ is similarly discussed in relation to the submissive’s ability to say no and the dominant respecting that which is.

I would argue that within BDSM involving the dominant partner actively in the discourse of consent would take away from the strong, intense and almost mythic image of the dominant and make them more human and ironically it might be the thing that makes BDSM more accessible and comfortable. The following example can illustrate some of the discourse presented so far:

BDSM is sexual, in any sexual activity if both parties are not consenting then one of them is committing a crime. I firmly reject the idea that women are always the ones who "have the power" to stop something because everyone does. Even in M/f the male dom still has the right to end an activity for any reason as does the fem sub. I also want to call out the dangerous consequences of thinking that consent is gendered. Female rapists are a thing and a lot of them think they aren't rapists simply because they're women. As for why there's differing advice between M/f and F/m, its because femdom is heavily fetishized to the point that a lot of what you find online is fap fodder, not actual advice. If it's not a horny guy writing out a fantasy like

it really happened or like it's advice, it's a pro-domme doing the same thing as an ad. So when you read something that handwaves away consent it means you're (hopefully) reading someone's erotica being passed off as a "true story" or "advice".
(Reddit.com, online BDSMCommunity discussion, access: May, 2021)

The practitioner here shows how not only gendering BDSM but consent can negatively impact people's sexual experiences within BDSM and lead to abusive and unsafe environments. For the above participant, dominance and submission within BDSM needs to be kept separately from a gendered discourse and regardless of the person's gender or BDSM role, being able to consent and withdraw consent is what would make the relationship equal. What piqued my interest here is the mention of how female Dommess are overly sexualised, are almost not seen as actual human beings and rarely involved in online discourses. This happens since female dominants are being heavily reduced to their gender and hypersexualised, thus stripped away from power. Levey and Pinsky (2015) have documented the intersecting stigmas related to Dominatrixes, especially the professional ones. On one hand, female Dommess are heavily stigmatized as deviant women due to their sado-masochistic inclination and become heavily sexualised since the '*Dominant*' role is not seen as belonging to women, therefore a Dominatrix becomes 'Othered' and 'exotified' (Said, 1978; Levey and Pinsky, 2015). On the other hand, pro – Dommess are often disrespected and facing further stigma because they are sex workers, thus, the fetishism and hypersexualisation become even stronger and the 'power' of the Domme becomes weaker since they are getting paid by the subs (Levey and Pinsky, 2015).

It is clear that both dominant men and women are dealing with many issues stemming back from the way they are being tied to their respective genders and are expected to act a certain way within BDSM not due to their kink, but due to their gender identity. This is being noticed across the scene and people (such as the following participant) are actively trying to explain how and why the dissonance is occurring:

However, gender does not determine your inclinations towards domination or submission [...]. Men feel compelled by socially conditioned to hide their feelings and needs, maybe even from themselves, but often experience anger and anxiety since submission [necessarily] requires becoming vulnerable. They often struggle emotionally with dealing with the submission, since it is being fought with their

internalized toxic attitudes[...] Again, there are many exceptions, and these tendencies often fade over time, resulting in dommes and subs with a deeper understanding of what their kink-life is about than most, but the [challenges] and complications in the beginning, as well as the fact that these people are often paired up, makes it difficult to find people, and to make it work[...] I think the [solution] to these complications isn't as much kink related as it is gender related. I believe everyone can benefit from sitting down and thinking about what it means to them to be whatever gender they are, and then what it would be like for people of other genders, ideally by listening to them. (Reddit.com, Online discussion BDSM group; access: Sept. 2021)

As pointed out by the participant, it is not the kink that it is at the heart of the problem, as kinks and BDSM roles can be experienced and lived by anyone as long as it is within their sexual inclination, but it is gender and more specifically pre – conditioned imposed gender attitudes that are making the participation within BDSM complicated. While it seems that the informant above might be leading an obvious discourse, what is interesting is the way they are separating gender from the kink and outlining how men do struggle with internalised gender expectation that are not resonating with them and are definitely not resonating with the experience of their BDSM roles. What is argued above is a much-needed change into the complex relationship between gender and kink. I would also like to draw the attention on the difficulty of displaying anger and aggression. In [Chapter 5](#) I introduced a workshop demo that was attended as part of my fieldwork. The demonstrators were teaching us to perform a highly intense and emotionally ‘aggressive’ BDSM play – It was essentially a kidnapper and kidnappee situation. There were lots of warnings about making sure the submissive (the ‘kidnappee’) is being taken care of and that the aftercare needs to be planned carefully and might take longer than usual because of the intensity of the play. There were lots of questions from the audience about how to ensure the safety and the mental wellbeing of the participant and only one person questioned, ‘*Well, what about the Dom? Surely, they would need emotional support too*’. The demonstrator who was in the role of the Dominant, replied that this is an important question that not many people think about since there is the [wrongful] assumption that only subs experience difficulties during play which again might be related to the aforementioned anxieties about the Dominant

having no feelings and say in a play. In fact, displaying aggression and domination can be hard and very emotionally intense (Newmahr, 2011) and dominant partners can struggle with these emotions and not knowing how to express them.

In fact, being a Dominant does not necessarily come with aggression and many practitioners might struggle with stereotypical expectations of Dominance. The following conversation captures the frustration of what it is to be a male dominant and a BDSM partner quite well:

This is a wonderful realisation. I had an opposite version of this where a woman decided I wasn't Dom enough because I wasn't being an asshole. Our views of relationship and gender dynamics are, in general, terrible.

ugh, so many people believe there's only one depiction of a dom. soft doms need more representation

I don't even think being nice means you're a soft Dom. I've had a guy really respect my boundaries and treat me wonderfully but i certainly wouldn't call him a soft Dom in his strict sadist play. You can degrade and humiliate without being an ass.

Exactly. You can also be "soft" and still be an asshole.

(Reddit.com, observed conversation in BDSMCommunity, discussion, Nov.2021)

Here the people are separating the notion of the 'person' from the notion of a 'Dom', as well as from the notion of gender. The role of the Dom is fully taken away from stereotypical notions of 'masculinity' and it is discussed in its own separate category thus 'Dom' becomes a BDSM role only, not a gender corresponding role. Furthermore, the practitioners are also drawing lines between being 'nice' and being 'soft'. Nice refers to the Dominant's ability to respect, treat well and deliver pleasures to the submissive. This does not mean that they are not sadistic. And vice versa, being sadistic and hard in the context of a BDSM role does not make the Dominant a bad person. On the other hand, being gentle with the domination and pain delivery does not absolve the Dominant from being a terrible person in other aspects. This discussion is fascinating as it presents not only the 'de – gendering' of the domination, but also shows the diversity and eroding of the category of

the Dominant as well. The masculinities at hand here are also broken down – not ascribing to the traditional gender scripts of what men should do is challenged.

7. 4. Conclusion

This chapter discussed and concluded the way gender roles might be represented within BDSM and explored the claims that gender might not be as important when it comes to BDSM roles and roleplays, thus providing the need for BDSM to be kept away from conventional gender binary structures. The arguments furthermore looked at how masculinities in particular are being framed and understood by the participants and whether we can talk about contingency in terms of masculinities. The role of sex within BDSM and kink was also explored, and the chapter concluded the need to keep phallogentric sex away from people's experiences of kink, thus minimizing BDSM's association with pornography and sexual violence. The idea of studying kink and BDSM through sports' framework was also discussed which I believe is something that can be further theorized in future research as it can be helpful to understand BDSM practitioners' experiences better.

The overlying argument in the chapter was the need to open up and diversify the categories of 'dominance' and 'submission' in order to allow for people to explore these roles and fit them within their own individual desires. The argument was also extended towards gender – as based on some of the presented data, we might need to de – gender the BDSM roles as it seems that the gendered conditions might be largely incompatible with the scene and practitioners are actively trying to navigate that and find it hard to fit within prescribed roles. In this case we saw how BDSM can be useful in understanding how masculinities specifically need to be understood outside of binary structures and divisions. Overall the chapter fit within existing arguments that BDSM exists outside of gender structures and it explored and brought these arguments further.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.1. The road so far...

As my thesis argues, gender expressions and performances within BDSM are complex and multifaceted with masculinities being quite fascinating and contingent. Attempting to capture the masculinities in a BDSM context was both intriguing but also challenging and on occasion vexing. On one hand, the literature that is specifically researching BDSM masculinities is rare except for Bauer (2016), Scott (2015), Newmahr (2011), Childs (2016) and Mosher (2016). At the same time the overall masculinities theories have been long challenged, changed, with new theories emerging. As such it was challenging to find a theory that worked for me and that was fitting for my study. On the other hand, BDSM is a contested area of study especially within feminist research and it is tied to the political (Hong, 2022). I have argued that research on sex and BDSM can still utilise the binary division of 'negative' vs 'positive', despite much feminist research showing that the discourse surrounding gender, sexualities and sexual platforms is more complicated than that, and the binary debates hurt more than they help (Gill, 2013). Often the people hurt the most are women, but also LGBTQI+ individuals whose sexualities often are either suppressed, ignored or scrutinized in order to put the attention on straight white upper-class femininity (Albury, 2014; Attwood, 2018). And yet we need to be aware that often various sexual behaviours can be unsafe for women under patriarchal state. BDSM can be dangerous and pretending it is not can be damaging and silencing its victims (Fanghanel, 2020). As based on my data, the BDSM physical scene can be dangerous yet, this does not mean BDSM is inherently bad. This thesis is not revolutionary in this regard. My research is, however, important since it focuses on men and masculinities specifically, and the ways the roles of dominance, submsison and switching are being practiced and understood which is overall an underrepresented research area within anthropology and gender studies. The original findings and contribution to the field are outlined in the following section.

8. 2. Original contribution and Findings

The literature on BDSM has been discussing its ability to queer and transform gender for years now (Newmahr, 2011; Simula and Sumerau, 2019; Barker, 2013). So, one of my first questions was immediately, how can this help the theorizing of masculinities? This is a broad question, yet I believe that the data I have gathered overall has shed a light on this. BDSM challenges the ways that masculinities are configured and may enable people to explore their sexual and erotic selves in different ways as BDSM practices can reject structural and binary notions of what gender is. However, as based on some of in person data I gathered when visiting events, BDSM can replicate heteronormativity. Nevertheless, overall, practitioners are expressing their capability to diversify the BDSM roles they are performing and their gender identities. In this sense, BDSM can problematize 'gender' and erode its fixed meaning. This is very important for masculinities, as often masculinities are studied through fixed structural models (Johansson and Ottemo, 2015). BDSM practices have the potential to "open" the theory and practices of masculinities, to challenge them and weaken them – BDSM practitioners are expressing the need to perform their own masculinities without being boxed in unbreakable categories. BDSM also has the capacity to illustrate Berggren's influential sticky masculinities concept in real life. As it was discussed in Chapter 4, some dominant men might express the need for dominance because they feel they have to while they desire submission. The fear of ridicule and social expectations are fixing their gender performances. Yet, as Berggren argues, man can have both through the sticky masculinity. However, this is not very clear how it can be achieved in real life. Through BDSM, however, we can see men becoming more comfortable to try and indulge their desires, albeit secretly and still with fear of repercussions. In this case, based on my research, I would confirm other studies on the transformative power of BDSM (Turley, 2022; Mok and Wong, 2019), however, my research is unique in the fact that it can show how BDSM is specifically transformative when it comes to masculinities. Here I would also argue that BDSM has the ability to help men and masculinities to be something they want by going against the traditional masculinity model prescribed to bodies read as male (Berggren, 2014). Nevertheless, we need to be careful about painting overly positive picture here, as this also has the potential for men to exercise violence. As discussed in Chapter 4, some dominant women have expressed anxieties about submissive men using their position to

undermine and abuse dominatrixes, especially when the (in)famous saying, ‘topping from the bottom’ is utilised. Here my research confirmed Lindemann (2011) who also noted the potential of male submissives to exercise power over the dominatrix thus replicating gendered based violence.

Masculinities within BDSM are becoming more contingent and on occasions difficult to define and fit within strict structures. It became clear that masculinities are ‘messy’. Based on the data, I have discovered that Dominant men especially find it hard to be boxed within structural expectations of gender and dominance in BDSM context. In Chapter 6 I argued that dominance within BDSM might not even be compatible with forms of masculinities that are patriarchal and toxic. In fact, practitioners are open to discussions and have expressed annoyance and hope for a change in how both masculinities and dominance are treated as rigid and unchanging. As shown in chapters 4 and 6, trans men are discussing frustrations with how they can be boxed and, on occasion, even denied their dominant side, as they might face transphobia and ridicule for not being ‘masculine enough’. The disconnect between dominance and toxic masculinities is one of my more interesting findings. Even though it might seem obvious, it is not specifically recorded in neither the literature on masculinities, nor the literature on BDSM.

There are also changes in the way submission and masculinities are seen as well. In Chapter 7, specific attention was paid to how the definition of ‘submission’ needs to be updated to better capture how people’s identities and gender expressions fluctuate. For example, it was argued that.

I was mainly interested in the question of whether the masculine/feminine binary is being challenged in BDSM and whether it helps people to explore their identities and sexualities, however, the in-person data collection was limited in this regard. This is where the digital data collection was useful to examine this question. As showed in chapters 4, 6 and 7 practitioners are attempting to break away from strict categories and are moving away from simplistic and binary understanding of gender. BDSM roles allow for people to experience their identities in more productive ways. For example, as I demonstrated in Chapter 6, people can challenge the unnecessary gendering of the BDSM roles and their gender identities. Men specifically are discussing how the role of the dominant for example cannot exist alongside traditional masculinity expressions. Mentions of emotions and feelings are

also common, with the male practitioners talking about how dominance requires both thus bringing a more emotive and traditionally feminine understanding of relationships. Based on the data presented in Chapter 7, some practitioners also are using both feminine and masculine personas depending on how they feel and what performance they want to present during role plays. People can use words such as 'mommy', 'daddy', 'sir', 'mistress' interchangeably without actually gendering them. However, this is mainly true for female practitioners, which aligns with Martinez' study (2018) on gender fluidity roles within BDSM. As she observed women tend to be more fluid and apply wider gender performances. While men use more strictly masculine sounding BDSM names (such as 'daddy' and 'sir'), there are still evidence of men trying to create more well-rounded and less strict masculine performances. Overall, there is pushback against the traditional gender binary divide, yet again I need to caution against the overstating of gender contingency within BDSM. The analysis and arguments presented here can appear contradictory or even 'knotty' at places, but this needs to be accepted rather than seen as an obstacle or difficulty. This shows that BDSM and gender cannot be clearly defined and the 'messiness' itself is a characteristic that needs to be embraced.

The notion of 'fluidness' should not be overstated within BDSM. As it was also examined, on occasions BDSM can replicate heteronormativity and binary ideas of gender, sex and coupling. In chapter 5 data presented from the physical fieldwork conducted prior COVID – 19, showcased that some BDSM events within UK have examples of heteronormative bonding. This should not be seen as a criticism over BDSM; in fact, an explanation offered in chapters 4 and 5 stated that due to issues of trust, safety and consent, often BDSM events would require for people to have known each other previously and many partygoers are in fact long term couples. The data is interesting because we should be more careful about painting BDSM as overly fluid and transcending boundaries. Here masculinities can also conform to more stereotypical ways of performing gender. This should not be seen as a general statement either, but as something that can happen and we need to reflect on this in order to have a more holistic and fuller picture of how gender, and masculinities specifically, operate within the BDSM scene.

Each chapter touched upon issues of heteronormativity and gender binary and whether BDSM enforces or breaks those. As Chapter 5 discussed, based on my limited physical in

person data collection, BDSM events can reproduce heteronormativity and many couples fall within the standard understanding of dominants and submissives; namely men being dominant and their partners being submissive women. Yet, this is not a bad or negative thing, it is just that we might need to be more careful about overplaying the fluidness and boundary breaking of BDSM.

Many of the people I met were also identifying as cis and there were unfortunately instances of transphobia, and more rigid understanding of gender roles. However, as mentioned, my in-person fieldwork based around the UK BDSM clubs was short – lived and I could not visit a large number of events, so this was just something that I observed and needed to analyse. These issues of transphobia were quite shocking to me, as personally I did not expect to observe that. There is a fascinating body of literature (Bauer, 2016; Childs, 2016; Mosher et al, 2006) that is discussing trans identities and queer representation within BDSM and I think I just expected overall acceptance of people who do not identify with heteronormative gender binary identities. My findings regarding transphobia here are original and it would be interesting to see further research into this issue, considering that the UK currently has had many issues regarding transphobia and trans rights being pushed back (see Milton, 2022 on the current anti trans legislation by the UK government) It seems that the BDSM scene might be reflecting that as well.

Now last but not least, I would like to focus on my methodological contribution and the way I performed my study. As already outlined before, my methods are not new or original. I utilised standard participant observation fieldwork and online data collection through the use of ready available texts. I believe, however, that my experience as a female PhD researcher in a sexual environment would be a welcome addition to the academic literature in anthropology and gender studies. While feminist scholars, and especially women of colour in anthropology, have long written about positionality and the racialised and gendered dynamics concerning the researchers' Body, I believe that we do need to keep pushing these reflexive writings. As it stands currently, the neoliberal UK university system is not properly equipped to protect its researchers and often ethics and risk forms fail to recognise the positionality of the researchers and the dangers associated with this. As such, my methodological experience within the UK BDSM scene, as a PhD student, would

hopefully be helpful for future researchers and possibly, it might serve to aid into institutional changes.

8. 2. 1. Limitations

This thesis, while holding importance within the subject of gender studies and anthropology, is far from perfect and fully comprehensive. As the PhD program was only four years (and the actual data collection happens within barely two years) and due to Covid – 19 making the research even more difficult, there are things I had to prioritize in my research and there are things that need further exploring.

Firstly, I did not get much data on the role of the ‘switch’. While I have encountered some discussions on it, overall I did not manage to bring well rounded discussion on the switch. I believe based on some of the things I saw online that the role of the switch is getting more accepted and it is eliciting discussions and people admitting more to a switch type of role instead of just identifying with a singular BDSM roles. Looking at male switches specifically can be a great addition to the study on men and masculinities.

Another thing that my thesis could not address is the issues of race and racism.

Unfortunately, during my limited in person fieldwork, I met mainly white British BDSM practitioners during the events, so I could not comment on racial dynamics within the scene. When it comes to the online collection, I could not observe race and ethnicity either, or I did not see people identifying their backgrounds. I believe a specific study on Black masculinity in the UK BDSM scene is much needed, as most BDSM research is on the USA BDSM scene and often focuses on Black women and issues of sexuality, reclaiming of Black pleasure, misogynoir and abuse within the scene. I was hoping I could address Black masculinities within BDSM, and it is unfortunate that my in-person fieldwork fell through and I could not secure interviews.

I believe studies focusing specifically on men and masculinities within BDSM is definitely needed especially in relation to how men might be resisting or reproducing traditional gender norms within the scene. I have addressed issues of submission and submissive men, but the academic literature often focuses on submissive women especially due to anxieties

associated with submission and female vulnerability, which I have covered in the thesis. More research on submissive men would be beneficial for men and masculinity studies but also for the study on BDSM overall.

As a concluding thought, I believe my research has an important place in the men and masculinity studies, as I have attempted to challenge the concept of 'masculinities' on theoretical level, as well as in real stories. The research on BDSM managed to ground my research and move it away from just abstract thoughts and concepts on masculinities. For example, while very influential to me, the concept of 'sticky' masculinities needed more real-life examples in order to show how it can actually work. Chapters 4 and 7 addressed this and attempted to transform the abstract into more tangible concept. Theories need to reflect the subjective, real life experiences of men and I believe that my thesis managed to point masculinities studies in that direction.

8.3. Personal thoughts, Reflections and Future Directions

Unfortunately for me and many other researchers, these past couple of years were not the easiest to do a PhD. A PhD program is already challenging as it is and having to navigate through a global pandemic made things much more difficult. Financial issues, burn out, stress and worries about the future were frequent, yet this is not unique to me and all of my other PhD friends suffered from the same issues.

However, before I started the research, I did not realise how difficult it would be for me to study masculinities. I wish I had seen more writings about how to write an effective study on men without excusing misogyny, patriarchy and abuse, but also making it positive and inclusive of men from all walks of life. I would like to turn here to hooks (2015[1984]). As she wrote:

Women in lower-class and poor groups, particularly those who are non-white, would not have defined women's liberation as women gaining social equality with men, since they are continually reminded in their everyday lives that all women do not share a common social status. Concurrently, they know that many males in their social groups are exploited and oppressed. Knowing that men in their groups do not

have social, political, and economic power, they would not deem it liberatory to share their social status. While they are aware that sexism enables men in their respective groups to have privileges that are denied them, they are more likely to see exaggerated expressions of male chauvinism among their peers as stemming from the male's sense of himself as powerless and ineffectual in relation to ruling male groups, rather than an expression of an overall privileged social status. (2015 [1984]: 19)

I would like to focus on the second part concerning men and economic class. We assume that patriarchy awards men the same way, and 'men' are often seen as a monolith. A singular category that experiences the fruits of patriarchal power in the same way. As hook observes, obviously, this is not true, and as she writes, it is this illusion of power that can create very misogynistic men because they feel like they are failing whatever privilege they are supposed to have and they need to get it back. This inspired me to see that patriarchy and capitalism work together, and while men are emboldened by patriarchy, they might in fact be denied any proper access to actual power, as hooks argues. But also, I had to keep asking myself: Which men am I studying? What masculinities? Why does it feel like when I read about men and masculinities, I read about some structured unchanging monolith? How can I break that?

Socialist feminism and Marxist feminism have spoken about patriarchy and capitalism being the same, and some feminists, 'took over some Marxist concepts to suggest that patriarchy was based on a domestic mode of production in which husbands as a class exploited their wives through controlling their labour' (Pringle, 2020 [1995]): 198). However, I do think we need to be careful with equating the two, as capitalism exploits the working classes equally, often regardless of gender. The problem is that while most people with wealth are men (because of patriarchy), that wealth is rarely accessible or gives any form of power to working-class and economically disadvantaged men. As argued by Mastrangelo (2021), it is as if capitalism does not necessarily care about gender, so it seems that it has superficially blurred the lines between men and women.

What inspired me here was the idea that men are not a single monolith or five fixed structural types. Not all men experience power and privilege the same, and it is this reminder that kept driving my research. Studying men and masculinities through the

constant lens of power is not helping us break away from patriarchy; instead, it feels that we keep giving and granting men power repeatedly unintentionally. And it also seems that we study masculinities through very heterosexual, cis lenses, which for me, just keeps reinforcing patriarchal gender binary ideas. At the same time, we must hold men accountable for gender-based sexual violence and misogyny and we should not dismiss men's perpetuating of patriarchy and their interest in it. And this is what made my study so difficult for me. How do I critique patriarchy without necessarily making it a man problem but also noting men's continuous reproduction of unequal gender relations and not absolving men for perpetuating patriarchal social order and chauvinism? How do I hold men accountable but also show that not all men experience 'masculinity' the same? I also did not want to exclude women and gendered relations from the conversation, as O'Neill (2015) argues that masculinity studies have very selective engagement with feminist theory and when masculinities scholars appropriate feminist theory, they, 'focus on the burdens of masculinity for men, without any concomitant analysis of men's interest in maintaining unequal gender relations' (2015: 107, 108). I did not want to keep reproducing this issue, so I had to be careful to not downplay the complicated social and sexual politics when it comes to inequality. Therefore, my analysis and data on the BDSM scene had to critically examine women's experiences with BDSM and men within it, as BDSM practitioners do reproduce and do suffer from unequal gender relations.

I have tried to capture men's real lived experiences based on Berggren's ideas and show how 'messy' masculinities and how varied men's lives can be. I think BDSM really helped me do this, as BDSM tries to operate outside of patriarchy, it showed how men could experience their identities outside of patriarchy as well. I only hope that my research will be helpful to people, not just men, but anyone who is dissatisfied with the patriarchal gender order. I hope my research inspires future studies that focus on feminism, subjectivity and masculinities. And I can only hope that I did feminism and masculinities justice.

Bibliography:

1. Aagaard, J., Matthiesen, N. 2015. Methods of materiality: participant observation and qualitative research in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Vol. 13 (1).
2. Abelson, M.J., 2016. 'You aren't from around here': race, masculinity, and rural transgender men. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 23(11), pp.1535-1546.
3. Abrams, L. 2010. Sampling 'Hard to Reach' Populations in Qualitative Research: The Case of Incarcerated Youths. *Qualitative Social Works*. Vol, 9(4).
4. Ahmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
5. Airaksinen, T. 2017. A Philosophical and Rhetorical Theory of BDSM. *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, 38(1), pp.53–73.
6. Albury, K., Byron, P. 2014. Queering sexting and sexualisation. *Media international Australia incorporating culture and policy*, Nov 2014, Vol.153.
7. Allain, K. 2014. 'What happens in the room stays in the room': conducting research with young men in the Canadian Hockey League. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*. Vol. 6 (2).
8. Allan, J. 2019. Queer theory and critical masculinity studies in Gottzén, L., Mellström, U., Shefer, T. *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies*. Routledge.
9. Alldred, P., Fox, N. 2015. The sexuality assemblages of young men: A new materialist analysis. *Sexualities*. Vol. 18(8), pp: 905 – 920.
10. American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2007). Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf>
11. Andy, B. 2011. The post-subcultural turn: Some reflections ten years on. *Journal of youth studies*, 14(5), p.493.
12. Aouragh, M. 2018. Digital Anthropology. *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, 1 – 10.
13. Armstrong, E.A., Hamilton, L. and England, P., 2010. Is hooking up bad for young women? *Contexts*, 9(3), pp.22-27.

14. Attwood, F. 2006. Sexed Up: Theorizing the Sexualization of Culture. *Sexualities*, 9(1), pp.77–94.
15. Attwood, F. 2009. *Mainstreaming of sex*. London: I. B Tauris and Co Ltd.
16. Attwood, F. 2018. The last twenty years. *Sexualities*, 21(8), pp.1211–1213.
17. Attwood, F., Smith, C. Leisure sex: More sex! Better sex! Sex is fucking brilliant! Sex, Sex, SEX! In Blackshaw, T. 2015. *Routledge Handbook of Leisure Studies*. Oxon: Routledge.
18. Aune, K., Holyoak, R. 2018. Navigating the third wave: Contemporary UK feminist activists and 'third-wave feminism.' *Feminist Theory*, 19(2), pp.183–203.
19. Bain, A., Nash, C. 2006. Undressing the researcher: feminism, embodiment and sexuality at a queer bathhouse event. *Area*, Vol. 38: 1.
20. Baker, S., Edwards, R. 2012. How Many Qualitative Interviews is Enough? Discussion Paper. NCRM. (Unpublished).
21. Bakhtin, M.M. 1984. *Rabelais and his world*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
22. Banerjee, P., Merchant, R., Sharma, J. 2018. Kink and Feminism – Breaking the Binaries. *Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol.6 (3), pp: 313 – 320.
23. Barendregt, B. Diverse Digital Worlds in Horst, H., Miller, D. 2020. *Digital Anthropology*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
24. Barker, M. 2013. Consent is a grey area? A comparison of understandings of consent in *Fifty Shades of Grey* and on the BDSM blogosphere. *Sexualities*, 16(8), pp.896–914.
25. Barker, M. 2013. Gender and BDSM revisited: Reflections on a decade of researching kink communities. *Psychology of Women Section Review*, Vol. 15 No. 2.
26. Barker, M., Duschinsky, R. 2012. Sexualisation's Four Faces: Sexualisation and Gender Stereotyping in the "Bailey Review". *Gender and Education*, 24(3), pp.303–310.
27. Barnard, A. 2000. *History and theory in anthropology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
28. Baron, D. 2018. Countering the backlash against nonbinary pronouns. <https://blogs.illinois.edu/view/25/706551> [accessed: July, 2020]
29. Basiliere, J., 2019. Staging Dissents: Drag kings, resistance, and feminist masculinities. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 44(4), pp.979-1001.

30. Bauer, R. 2016. Desiring masculinities while desiring to question masculinity? How embodied masculinities are renegotiated in les-bi-trans-queer BDSM practices. *NORMA*, 11(4), pp.237–254.
31. Beasley, C. 2015. Caution! Hazards Ahead: Considering the Potential Gap between feminist thinking and men/ masculinities theory and practice. *Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 51, No. 3.
32. Beasley, C., 2013. Mind the Gap? Masculinity Studies and Contemporary Gender/Sexuality Thinking. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 28(75), pp.108–124.
33. Beasley, C., 2015. Caution! Hazards ahead: Considering the potential gap between feminist thinking and men/masculinities theory and practice. *Journal of Sociology*, 51(3), pp.566–581.
34. Beckmann, A. 2001. Deconstructing Myths: The Social Construction of ‘Sadomasochism’ versus ‘Subjugated Knowledges’ of Practitioners of Consensual SM. *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, Vol. 8(2), 66- 95.
35. Beckmann, A. 2009. *The Social Construction of Sexuality and Perversion: Deconstructing sadomasochism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
36. Bennett, A., Kahn-Harris, K. 2004. *After subculture: critical studies in contemporary youth culture*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.
37. Bennett, T. 2020. A Fine Line Between Pleasure and Pain: Would Decriminalising BDSM Permit Nonconsensual Abuse? *Liverpool Law Review*, 42:161–183.
38. Beres, M.A., Macdonald, J.E.C. 2015. Talking About Sexual Consent. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 30(86), pp.418–432.
39. Berger, R. 2015. Now I see it, now I don’t: Researcher’s position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, Vol. 15(2).
40. Berggren, K. 2014. Sticky Masculinities: Post – structuralism, Phenomenology and Subjectivity in Critical Studies on Men. *Men and Masculinities*. Vol. 17, No.
41. Berggren, K. 2014. Sticky Masculinity: Post-structuralism, Phenomenology and Subjectivity in Critical Studies on Men. *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 17 (3), pp: 231 – 252.
42. Bernard, H.R., 2017. *Research methods in anthropology: qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield

43. Berry, M.J., Argüelles, C.C., Cordis, S., Ihmoud, S. and Estrada, E.V., 2017. Toward a fugitive anthropology: Gender, race, and violence in the field. *Cultural Anthropology*, 32(4), pp.537-565.
44. Better, A., Simula, B.L. 2015. How and for whom does gender matter? Rethinking the concept of sexual orientation. *Sexualities*, 18(5-6), pp.665–680.
45. Biggerstaff, D., Thompson, A. 2008. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA): A Qualitative Methodology of Choice in Healthcare Research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Vol. 5, No.3.
46. Bloor, M., Fincham, B. and Sampson, H., 2010. Unprepared for the worst: Risks of harm for qualitative researchers. *Methodological Innovations Online*, 5(1), pp.45-55.
47. Bloor, M., Fincham, B., Sampson, H. 2010. Unprepared for the Worst: Risks of Harm for Qualitative Researchers, *Methodological Innovations Online*, vol. 5(1) 45-55.
48. Bluteau, JM. 2021. Legitimising digital anthropology through immersive cohabitation: Becoming an observing participant in a blended landscape. *Ethnography*, 22(2), pp.267-285.
49. Boddy, C. 2016. Sample size for qualitative research. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, Vol. 19 Issue: 4, pp.426-432.
50. Bolton, R. Tricks, Friends and Lovers. Erotic Encounters in the Field in Kullick, D., Willson, M. 1995. *Taboo, Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*. London: Routledge.
51. Boltz, T., 2015. Fucking Tradition, Hard. *Behind the Veil*, p.39.
52. Bott, E. 2010. Favourites and Others: Reflexivity and the shaping of subjectivities in and data in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*. Vol. 10, No. 2.
53. Braun, V., Clark, V. 2006. Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol. 3(2).
54. Bridges, T. and Pascoe, C.J., 2014. Hybrid masculinities: New directions in the sociology of men and masculinities. *Sociology compass*, 8(3), pp.246-258.
55. Brown, C., Durtschi, J., Carrol, J., Willoughby, B. 2017. Understanding and predicting classes of college students who use pornography. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 66, pp.114–121.
56. Bryman, A. 2016. *Social research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University press.

57. Burmeister, E., Aitken, L. M. 2012. Sample size: How many is enough? *Australian Critical Care*, 25, 271-274.
58. Butler, J. 2004. *Undoing gender*. London: Routledge.
59. Byron, P. Social media platforms and sexual health in Attwood, F., Smith, C., McNair, B. 2018. *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality*. Oxon: Routledge.
60. Califia, P. 1988. *Macho Sluts: Erotic Fiction*. Boston: Allyson Publications.
61. Califia, P. 2000. *Public Sex: The Culture of Radical Sex*. San Francisco: Cleiss Press.
62. Carline, A., 2011. Criminal justice, extreme pornography and prostitution: Protecting women or promoting morality? *Sexualities*, 14(3), pp.312–333.
63. Carlström, C. 2018. BDSM, Interaction Rituals and Open Bodies. *Sexuality & Culture*, 22(1), pp.209–219.
64. Carlström, C., 2021. Spiritual experiences and altered states of consciousness—Parallels between BDSM and Christianity. *Sexualities*, 24(5-6), pp.749-766.
65. Cascalheira, C.J., Thomson, A. and Wignall, L., 2021. 'A certain evolution': a phenomenological study of 24/7 BDSM and negotiating consent. *Psychology & Sexuality*, pp.1-12.
66. Cattell-Daniels, C., 2015. Safe, Sane, and Consensual: Theatricality in BDSM and Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus. *With Caffeine & Careful Thought*, 2(1).
67. Chenail, R. 2011. Interviewing the Investigator: Strategies for Addressing Instrumentation and Researcher Bias Concerns in Qualitative Research. *The Qualitative Report*, 16(1).
68. Chess, S. 2016. *Male-to-Female Crossdressing in Early Modern English Literature: Gender, Performance, and Queer Relations*. New York: Routledge.
69. Childs, A. 2016. Hyper or hypo-masculine? Re-conceptualizing 'hyper-masculinity' through Seattle's gay, leather community. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 23(9), pp.1–14.
70. Cho, A. Queer Reverb: Tumblr, Affect, Time in Hillis, K., Paasonen, S., Petit, M. 2015. *Networked Affect*. Massachusetts: MIT Press
71. Cho, A., 2015. Queer reverb: Tumblr, affect, time in Hilis, K., Paasonen, S., Petit, M. *Networked affect*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
72. Chowdhury, M., Ali, H. Positivism and the Understanding of the Contemporary Social World: A critical Discussion. *Journal of Studies in Social Sciences*. Vol. 11, No. 2.

73. Christopholus, C. 2020. Getting Away with Murder. *New Law Journal*, Volume 170, Issues 786.
74. Clark, J., Duschinsky, R. 2018. Young masculinities, purity and danger: Disparities in framings of boys and girls in policy discourses of sexualisation. *Sexualities*, pp. 1 – 18.
75. Cleary, M., Horsfall, J., Hayter, M. 2014. *Data collection and sampling in qualitative research: does size matter?* John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
76. Clifford, J., Marcus, G. 1986. *Writing Culture*. California: California University Press.
77. Cohen, N., Arieli, T. 2011. Field research in conflict environments: Methodological challenges and snowball sampling. *Journal of Peace Research*, 48 (4).
78. Connell, R.W. 1987. *Gender and power*. Stanford.
79. Connell, R.W. 1998. Reply. *Gender & Society*, 12(4), pp.474–477.
80. Connell, R.W. 2005. *Masculinities*. Cambridge: Polity
81. Connell, R.W., Messerschmidt, J.W. 2005. Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept. *Gender & Society*, 19(6), pp.829–859
82. Cruz, A., 2016. *The color of kink: Black women, BDSM, and pornography*. NYU Press.
83. Cuklanz, L. and Erol, A., 2021. New feminist studies in audiovisual industries: The shifting image of hegemonic masculinity in contemporary television series. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, p.18.
84. Cuklanz, L., Erol, A. 2021. The Shifting Image of Hegemonic Masculinity in Contemporary U.S. Television Series. *International Journal of Communication*. Vol. 15, 545 – 562.
85. Cupples, J. 2002. The Field as a landscape of desire: Sex and Sexuality in Geographical fieldwork. *Area*. Vol. 34 (4).
86. Dana, J., Dawes, R., Peterson, N. 2013. Belief in the unstructured interview: The persistence of an illusion. *Judgment and Decision Making*, 8(5), pp.512–520.
87. Darwin, H., 2017. Doing gender beyond the binary: A virtual ethnography. *Symbolic Interaction*, 40(3), pp.317-334.
88. De Castro, E. 1998. Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 4, No. 3.
89. De Castro, E. 2012. Cosmological perspectivism in Amazonia and elsewhere. Masterclass Series 1, Manchester: *HAU Network of Ethnographic Theory*, pp. 44–168.

90. De Castro, E. 2015. Who is afraid of the Ontological Wolf? *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*. Vol. 33, No. 1.
91. De Visser, R., 2009. Young men, masculinity and alcohol. *Men's health: Body, identity and social context*, pp.126-144.
92. DeGroot, J., Carmack, H., Quinlan, M. 2015. "Topping from the Bottom": Relational Convergence of Meaning in Domestic Discipline Relationships. *Sexuality & Culture*, 19:85–102.
93. Dejonckheere, M., Vaughn, L. 2019. Semistructured interviewing in primary care research: a balance of relationship and vigour. *Family Medicine and Community Health*, Vol. 7, No. 2.
94. Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. 1987. *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Continuum
95. Denzin, N. K. 1978. Triangulation: A case for methodological evaluation and combination. *Sociological methods*, 339-357.
96. Denzin, NK. 2001. *Interpretive Interactionism*. London: Sage.
97. DeWalt, K., DeWalt, R. 2010. *Participant observation a guide for fieldworkers*. Lanham: Altamira Press.
98. Di Bernardo, G. From Physics to Sociology in Alai, M., Buzzoni, M., Tarozzi, G. 2015. *Science between Truth and Ethical Responsibility*. Cham: Springer.
99. Dines, G., Thompson, L. and Whisnant, R., 2010. Arresting images: Anti-pornography slide shows, activism and the academy. In *Everyday pornography* (pp. 29-45). Routledge.
100. Dines, G., Thompson, L., Whisnant, R. 2010. Arresting images: Anti-pornography slide shows, activism and the academy in Boyle, K. *Everyday Pornography*. Routledge.
101. Douglas, M., 2003. *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. Routledge.
102. Doyle, S. 2013. Reflexivity and the Capacity to Think. *Qualitative Health Research*. Vol. 23, No. 2.
103. Drdová, L. and Saxonberg, S., 2021. Generations of BDSM Czech style: The elimination of roles in role-playing?. *Sexualities*.

104. Drdová, L. Saxonberg, S. 2021. Generations of BDSM Czech style: The Eliminations of roles in role – playing? *Sexualities* 0(0), pp: 1 – 18.
105. Dummitt, C., 2011. *The manly modern: Masculinity in postwar Canada*. UBC Press.
106. Duschinsky, R., Renold, E., Ringrose, J. 2013. What does sexualisation mean? *Feminist Theory*, 14(3), pp. 255–264.
107. Dymock, A. 2012. But femsub is broken too! On the normalisation of BDSM and the problem of pleasure. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 3(1), pp.54–68.
108. Eade, D. 2013. Anti-porn: The Resurgence of Anti-pornography Feminism. *Gender & Development*, 21(1), pp.202–204.
109. Elliott, K. 2020. *Young Men Navigating Contemporary Masculinities*. Cham : Springer International Publishing : Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan
110. Elliott, K., 2020. *Young men navigating contemporary masculinities*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
111. Engelberg, J. and Needham, G., 2019. Purging the queer archive: Tumblr’s counterhegemonic pornographies. *Porn Studies*, 6(3), pp.350-354.
112. Engelberg, J., Needham, G. 2019. Purging the queer archive: Tumblr’s counterhegemonic pornographies. *Porn Studies*, vol. 6 (3).
113. Eriksen, T.H. 2015. *Small Places, Large Issues: An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London: Pluto Press.
114. Etikan, I., Musa, S., Alkassim, R. 2016. Comparison of Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*. Vol. 5(1).
115. Evans-Pritchard, E.E. 1976. *Witchcraft, oracles, and magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
116. Everitt-Penhale, B., Ratele, K., 2015. Rethinking Traditional Masculinity As Constructed, Multiple ≠ Hegemonic Masculinity. *South African Review of Sociology*, 46(2), pp.4–22.
117. Fanghanel, A. 2019. Asking for it: BDSM sexual practice and the trouble of consent. *Sexualities*, pp: 1 – 18.

118. Fay, D., Haddadi, H., Seto, M., Wang, H., Kling, C. 2016. An Exploration of Fetish Social Networks and Communities in *International Conference and School on Network Science*, p.195 – 204.
119. Felix, G. and Guattari, D., 1987. A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia. *Trans. by Massumi, B., University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.*
120. Femia, J.V., 1981. Gramsci's political thought: hegemony, consciousness, and the revolutionary process, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
121. Fennell, J., 2018, December. "It's All About the Journey": Skepticism and Spirituality in the BDSM Subculture. In *Sociological Forum* (Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 1045-1067).
122. Fiesler, C., Beard, N., Keegan, B. 2020. No Robots, Spiders, or Scrapers: Legal and Ethical Regulation of Data Collection Methods in Social Media Terms of Service, *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, 14(1), 187-196.
123. Finkelde, D. 2013. Post-structuralism. *New Catholic Encyclopaedia Supplement 2012-2013: Ethics and Philosophy*, 3, 1245-1248
124. Fontana, B. 2000. Logos and Kratos: Gramsci and the Ancients on Hegemony. *Journal of History of Ideas*, Vol. 61 (2), pp: 305 – 326.
125. Fontana, B. State and Society: The Concept of Hegemony in Gramsci in Haugaard, M., Lentner, H. 2006. *Hegemony and Power: Consensus and Coercion in Contemporary Politics*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
126. Foucault, M., Gordon. C. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings*. New York: Pantheon Books.
127. Foucault, M., Rabinow, P. 1997. *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. New York: The New Press.
128. Fox, N., Alldred, P. 2013. The sexuality-assemblage: desire, affect, anti-humanism. *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 61, 769–789.
129. Francis, J., Johnston, M., Robertson, C., Glidewell, L., Entwistle, V., Eccles, M., Grimshaw, J. 2010. What is an adequate sample size? Operationalising data saturation for theory-based interview studies. *Psychology and Health*, vol. 25 (1).
130. Frank. K. Observational Methods in Sexuality Research in DeLamater, J., Plante, R. 2015. *Handbook of the Sociology of Sexualities*. Springer, Cham.

131. Freeman, M. 2014. The Hermeneutical Aesthetic of Thick Description. *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol. 20(6).
132. Fusch, P., Ness, L. 2015. Are We There Yet? Data Saturation in Qualitative Research. *The Qualitative Report*, Vol. 20(9).
133. Garlick, S. 2016. *The nature of masculinity: critical theory, new materialisms, and technologies of embodiment*. Toronto: UBC Press
134. Garner, Maria. 2012. The Missing Link: The Sexualisation of Culture and Men. *Gender and Education*, 24(3), pp.325–331.
135. Geertz, C. 1973. *The interpretation of cultures selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.
136. Geertz, C. 2000. *Local knowledge further essays in interpretive anthropology*. New York: Basic Books.
137. Gerring, J. 2011. How Good Is Good Enough? A Multidimensional, Best-Possible Standard for Research Design. *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 64 (3).
138. Gerring, J. 2017. Qualitative Methods. *Annual Review of Political Science*. Vol. 20.
139. Gibson – Graham, J. 2014. Rethinking the Economy with Thick Description and Weak Theory. *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 55, No. 9.
140. Giddens, A. 2013. *The transformation of intimacy sexuality, love and eroticism in modern societies*. Hoboken: Wiley.
141. Gill, R., 2012. Media, Empowerment and the ‘Sexualization of Culture’ Debates. *Sex Roles*, 66(11), pp.736–745.
142. Gill, R., 2012. The Sexualisation of Culture? Social and Personality *Psychology Compass*, 6(7), pp.483–498.
143. Goode, A. 2002. Sexual Involvement and Social Research in a Fat Civil Rights Organization. *Qualitative Sociology*, Vol. 25, No. 4.
144. Graeber, D. 2015. Radical alterity is just another way of saying “reality.” HAU: *Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 5(2), pp.1–41.
145. Gramsci, A., Lawner, L., 1975. *Letters from prison*, London: Cape.
146. Green, A. 2008. The Sexual Organization of Desire: The Sexual Fields Approach. *Sociological Theory*, 26 (1), pp. 25 – 50

147. Green, A.I., 2013. 'Erotic capital' and the power of desirability: Why 'honey money' is a bad collective strategy for remedying gender inequality. *Sexualities*, 16(1-2), pp.137-158.
148. Greenebaum, J., Dexter, B. 2018. Vegan Men and Hybrid Masculinities. *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol 27 (6), pp: 637 – 648.
149. Greenebaum, J., Dexter, B. 2018. Vegan men and hybrid masculinity. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27(6), 637–648
150. Grix, J. 2010. *The foundations of research*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
151. Groes – Green, C. 2010. Orgies of the moment: Bataille's anthropology of transgression and the defiance of danger in post-socialist Mozambique. *Anthropological Research*, 10(4).
152. Groes – Green, C. 2012. Ambivalent Participation: Sex, Power and the Anthropologist in Mozambique. *Medical Anthropology*. Vol. 31, No. 1.
153. Groes – Green, C. 2012. Philogynous Masculinities. Contextualizing Alternative Manhood in Mozambique. *Men and Masculinities*. Vol. 15, No. 2.
154. Groes-Green, C., 2012. Philogynous Masculinities: Contextualizing Alternative Manhood in Mozambique. *Men and Masculinities*, 15(2), pp. 91–111.
155. Gruys, K. and Munsch, C.L., 2020, June. "Not Your Average Nerd": Masculinities, Privilege, and Academic Effort at an Elite University. In *Sociological Forum* (Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 346-369).
156. Guest, G., Bunce, A., Johnson, L. 2006. How Many Interviews Are Enough? An Experiment with Data Saturation and Variability. *Field Methods*, Vol. 18 (1).
157. Günel, G., Varma S., Watanabe, C. 2020. A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography, *Society for Cultural Anthropology*.
158. Gunnell, J.G. 2014. *Social Inquiry After Wittgenstein and Kuhn: Leaving Everything as It Is*. New York: Columbia University Press.
159. Guthrie, G. 2010. *Basic Research Methods*. London: SAGE.
160. Hagaman, A., Wutich. 2017. How Many Interviews Are Enough to Identify Metathemes in Multisited and Cross-cultural Research? Another Perspective on Guest, Bunce, and Johnson's (2006) Landmark Study. *Field Methods*, Vol. 29 (1).
161. Halperin, D. 1991. *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

162. Hamilton, L., Armstrong, E. 2009. Gendered Sexuality in Young Adulthood: Double Binds and Flawed Opinions. *Gender and Society*, Vol. 23(5), pp. 589 – 616.
163. Hammers, C. 2009. An Examination of Lesbian/Queer Bathhouse Culture and the Social Organization of (Im) Personal Sex. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. Vol. 28, No. 3.
164. Hammers, C. 2015. The queer logics of sex/desire and the ‘missing’ discourse of gender. *Sexualities*, 0(0) 1 – 21.
165. Hammersley, M. 1999: Some reflections on the current state of qualitative research. *Research Intelligence*, 70, 15-18.
166. Han, M.S., 2016. *Creating and Confining Spaces for Affective Materiality: BDSM and the Moral Economy of Neoliberalism* (Doctoral dissertation, University College London).
167. Hardy, S. The New Pornographies: Representations of Reality? in Attwood, F. 2009. *Mainstreaming of sex*. London: I. B Tauris and Co Ltd.
168. Harrell, M., Brad, M. 2009. Data Collection Methods. Semi – structured Interviews and Focus Groups. *National Defence research Institute*.
169. Harrison, A. 2018. *Ethnography*. Oxford: Oxford Scholarship.
170. Hasinoff, A. The media panic about teen sexting in Attwood, F., Smith, C., McNair, B. 2018. *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality*. Oxon: Routledge.
171. Hasse, C. 2015. *An anthropology of learning: on nested frictions in cultural ecologies*. London: Springer.
172. Haugaard, M., Lentner, H. 2006. *Hegemony and Power: Consensus and Coercion in Contemporary Politics*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
173. Hawkes, T. 2003. *Structuralism and Semiotics*. London: Routledge.
174. Hearn, J. 2005. From hegemonic masculinity to the hegemony of men. *Feminist Theory*, Vol 5 (1), pp: 49 – 72.
175. Hearn, J. 2008. The Personal is Work is Political is Theoretical: Continuities and Discontinuities in Women's Studies, (Pro)feminism, “Men” and My Selves. *NORA—Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, Vol 16:4, 241-256.

176. Hearn, J. 2012. A multi-faceted power analysis of men's violence to known women: from hegemonic masculinity to the hegemony of men. *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 60, 589–610.
177. Hebert, A., Weaver, A, 2014. An examination of personality characteristics associated with BDSM orientations. *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 23(2), pp.106–115.
178. Heckathorn, D. 2011. Comment: Snowball versus respondent driven sampling. *Sociological Methodology*.
179. Hekma, G. 2006. Sade, Masculinity, and Sexual Humiliation. *Men and Masculinities*, 9(2), pp.236–251.
180. Hempel, C.G., Oppenheim, P. 1948. Studies in the Logic of Explanation. *Philosophy of Science*, 15(2), pp.135–175.
181. Henare, A., Holbraad, M., Wastell, S. 2006. *Thinking through things: Theorising artefacts ethnographically*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
182. Hess, A., Flores, C. 2018. Simply more than swiping left: A critical analysis of toxic masculine performances on Tinder Nightmares. *New Media & Society*, 20(3), pp.1085–1102.
183. Hibbert, P., Couplan, C., Macintosh, R. 2010. Reflexivity: recursion and relationality in organizational research processes. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 5 No. 1.
184. Holt, K. 2016. Blacklisted: Boundaries, Violations, and Retaliatory Behavior in the BDSM Community. *Deviant Behavior*, 37(8), pp.1–14.
185. Homer, S. 2004. *Jacques Lacan*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.
186. Hong, J. 2022. Between Two Waves: Reconciliation of BDSM and Radical Feminism in Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber". *International Review of Literary Studies*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, pp. 09-17
187. Hopkins, P, Murray, A. 2014. *Masculinities and Place*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited
188. Hopkins, P. and Gorman-Murray, A. eds., 2014. *Masculinities and place*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.

189. Hoskin, R. 2020. "Femininity? It's the Aesthetic of Subordination": Examining Femmephobia, the Gender Binary, and Experiences of Oppression Among Sexual and Gender Minorities, *Archives of Sexual Behavior*.
190. Howson, R. 2006. *Challenging Hegemonic Masculinity*. Oxon: Routledge.
191. <https://rekink.com/terminology/glossary-of-kink-terminology-a-to-i/>
[accessed: September, 2022]
192. Hughes, J., Sharrock, W. 2015. *Theory and Methods of Sociology*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.
193. Ingold, T. 2014. That's enough about Ethnography! *HAU Journal of Ethnographic Theory*. Vol. 4, No. 1.
194. Jackson, C., 2016. The Negative Portrayal of Dominant and Submissive Roles in BDSM Relationships. *New Views on Gender*, 17, pp.53-67.
195. Jamshed, S. 2014. Qualitative Research method – interviewing and observation. *Journal of Basic and Clinical Pharmacy*. Vol. 5, No. 4.
196. Jones, C., Slater, J. 2020. The toilet debate: Stalling trans possibilities and defending 'women's protected spaces'. *The Sociological Review*, vol.68 (4)
197. Johansson, T., Ottemo, A. 2015. Ruptures in hegemonic masculinity: the dialectic between ideology and utopia. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 24(2), pp.192–206.
198. Kafle, N. 2011. Hermeneutic Phenomenological research method simplified. *Bodhi: An interdisciplinary Journal*, 5.
199. Kallio, H., Pietila, A., Johnson, M., Docent, M. 2016. Systematic methodological review: developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of Advanced nursing*. Vol. 72(12).
200. Karioris, F.G., Allan, J.A. 2017. Grow a Pair! Critically Analysing Masculinity and the Testicles. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 25(3), pp.245–261.
201. Kawulich, B. 2005. Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(2).
202. Kehily, M. 2012. Contextualising the Sexualisation of Girls debate: innocence, experience and young female sexuality. *Gender and Education* Vol. 24 (3), pp. 255 – 268

203. Kehily, M.J., 2012. Contextualising the sexualisation of girls debate: Innocence, experience and young female sexuality. *Gender and Education*, 24(3), pp.255-268.
204. Kelly, B. 2010. Sampling and Recruitment Issues in Qualitative Drugs Research: Reflections on the Study of Club Drug Users in Metro New York. *Substance Use and Misuse*. Vol. 45, No. 5.
205. Kelly, C. 2012. Sexism in Practice Feminist Ethics Evaluating the Hookup Culture. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 28(2), pp.27–48.
206. Khan, U. Fifty Shades of Ambivalence: BDSM representation in pop culture in Attwood, F., Smith, C., McNair, B. 2018. *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality*. Oxon: Routledge.
207. Kharel, D. 2015. Visual ethnography, thick description and cultural representation. *Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*. Vol. 9
208. Kimmel, M.S., 2000. *The gendered society*. Oxford University Press, USA.
209. King, T., Giles, D., Meher, M., Gould, H., 2020. Anthropology and #MeToo: Reimagining fieldwork, *Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 31:274–287.
210. King, T.J., Boarder Giles, D., Meher, M. and Gould, H., 2020. Anthropology and# MeToo: Reimagining fieldwork. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 31(3), pp.274-287.
211. Klement, K., 2017. Extreme rituals in a BDSM context: the physiological and psychological effects of the ‘Dance of Souls.’ *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 19(4), pp.453–469.
212. Klement, K., Lee, E., Ambler, J., Hanson, S., Comber, E., Wietting, D., Wagner, M., Burns, V., Cutler, B., Cutler, N., Reid, E., Sagarin, B. 2016. Extreme rituals in a BDSM context: the physiological and psychological effects of the ‘Dance of Souls’. *Culture, Health and Sexuality*. Vol, 19 (4), pp: 453 – 469.
213. Kloß, S. 2017. Sexual(ized) harassment and ethnographic fieldwork: A silenced aspect of social research, *Ethnography*, Vol. 18(3) 396–414.
214. Kooyman, L., Pierce, G., Zavadil, A. 2011. Hooking Up and Identity Development of Female College Students. *Adulthood Journal*, 10(1), pp.4–13.

215. Kratzer, J. 2020. Kinky Access: Information Provided to Young Adult Kinksters by “The Next Generation” Groups on Fetlife.com in Kalish, R (ed). *Young Adult Sexuality in the Digital Age*. IGI Global
216. Kristeva, J. 1982. *Powers of horror: an essay on abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.
217. Kuhn, T.S. 1970. *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
218. Kulick, D., Willson, M. 1995. *Taboo, Sex and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*. London: Routledge.
219. Kupers, T.A. 2005. Toxic masculinity as a barrier to mental health treatment in prison. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61(6), pp.713–724.
220. Laclau, E., Mouffe, C. 1985. *Hegemony and socialist strategy: towards a radical democratic politics*, London: Verso.
221. Langdrige, D., Butt, T. 2005. The Erotic Construction of Power Exchange. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 18(1), pp.65–73.
222. Lansdown, R. 2014. Crucible or Centrifuge? Bronislaw Malinowski’s Diary in the Strict sense of the word. *Configurations*. Vol. 22, No. 1.
223. Laverty, M. Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Phenomenology: A Comparison of Historical and Methodological Considerations. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 2 (3).
224. Lefkowich, M., 2019. When women study men: Gendered implications for qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, p.160.
225. Lentner, H. 2006. Hegemony and Autonomy. *Political Studies*, Vol. 53, pp: 735 – 752.
226. Lerum, K., Dworkin, S.L. 2009. “Bad Girls Rule”: An Interdisciplinary Feminist Commentary on the Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. *Journal of Sex Research*, 46(4), pp.250–263.
227. Leung, L. 2015. Validity, reliability, and generalizability in qualitative research. *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care*. Vol. 4(3).
228. Leurs, K. 2017. Leurs, K., 2017. Feminist data studies: Using digital methods for ethical, reflexive and situated socio-cultural research. *Feminist Review*, 115(1), pp.130-154.

229. Levey, T.G. and Pinsky, D., 2015. A constellation of stigmas: Intersectional stigma management and the professional dominatrix. *Deviant Behavior*, 36(5), pp.347-367.
230. Levy, A. 2006. *Female chauvinist pigs: women and the rise of raunch culture*. London: Pocket Books.
231. Lindeman, D. The dominatrix in Attwood, F., Smith, C., McNair, B. 2018. The *Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality*. Oxon: Routledge.
232. Lindemann, D. 2011. BDSM as therapy? *Sexualities*, 14(2), pp.151–172.
233. Liong, M., Chan, L.S. 2018. Walking a Tightrope on (Hetero)Sexuality: Performatively Vigilant Masculine Subjectivity in Response to Sexualized Culture. *Men and Masculinities*, pp 1 – 17.
234. Lorber, J. 2006. Shifting paradigms and challenging categories. *Social problems*, vol. 53 (4), p. 448 – 453.
235. Lorber, J., 2006. Shifting paradigms and challenging categories. *Soc. Probs.*, 53, p.448.
236. Lorber, J., Martin, P., Connell, R. 1998. Symposium on R. W. Connell's Masculinities. *Gender and Society*, 12(4), pp.469–477.
237. Mac an Ghail, M. and Haywood, C., 2022. State containment and closure of gendered possibilities among a millennial generation: On not knowing Muslim young men. *The Sociological Review*.
238. Magnusson, E., Marecek, J. 2015. *Doing Interview Based Qualitative Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
239. Malaurent, J., Avison, D. 2017. Reflexivity: A third essential R to enhance interpretative field studies. *Information and Management*, Vol. 54, No.7.
240. Manners, P. 2019. Trans Inclusion in Women only Spaces. *Concept*. Vol. 10.
241. Marshall, C., Rossman, G. 2014. *Designing Qualitative Research*. Sage Publications.
242. Martinez, K. 2018. BDSM Role Fluidity: A Mixed-Methods Approach to Investigating Switches Within Dominant/Submissive Binaries. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 65(10), pp.1299–1324.

243. Mastrangelo, F. 2021. *Theorizing #Girlboss Culture: Mediated Neoliberal Feminisms from Influencers to Influencers to Multi-level or Multi-level Marketing Schemes eting Schemes*. Dissertation, Virginia Commonwealth University.
244. Mauthner, M. 2002. *Ethics in qualitative research*. London: SAGE.
245. McBride, N., Palkki, J. 2020. Big boys don't cry (or sing) ... still?: a modern exploration of gender, misogyny, and homophobia in college choral methods texts, *Music Education Research*, 22:4, 408-420.
246. McCormack, A. Doing in Ely, M. 1991. *Doing Qualitative Research: Circles within Circles*. London: The Falmer Press.
247. McDonald, K., 2016. The sociolinguistics of gender, social status and masculinity in Aristophanes. *Journal of Historical Sociolinguistics*, 2(2), pp.155-188.
248. McIntosh, M., Morse, J. 2015. Situating and Constructing Diversity in Semi-Structured Interviews. *Global Qualitative Nursing Research*. 1 – 12.
249. McKee, A. The pornography consumer as Other in Attwood, F., Smith, C., McNair, B. 2018. *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality*. Oxon: Routledge.
250. McLean, J. 2019. *Changing Digital Geographies*. Cham: Palgrave MacMillan
251. McLean, K. 2021. 'Post – crisis masculinities' in Sierra Leone: revisiting masculinity theory. *Gender, Place and Culture, A journal of Feminist Geography*, Vol. 28 (6).
252. McNair, B. 2002. *Striptease culture sex, media and the democratisation of desire*. London: Routledge.
253. Merriam, S., Grenier, R. 2019. *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis*. San Francisco: Jossey – B
254. Messerschmidt, J.W., 2012. Engendering Gendered Knowledge: Assessing the Academic Appropriation of Hegemonic Masculinity. *Men and Masculinities*, 15(1), pp.56–76.
255. Miller, D. 2018. Digital Anthropology, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Anthropology*.
256. Milner, R. 2007. Race, Culture and Researcher Positionality: Working through Dangers Seen, Unseen, and Unforeseen. *Educational Researcher*, Vol 36, No. 7.

257. Mladenović, B. 2018. *Kuhn's Legacy: Epistemology, Metaphilosophy, and Pragmatism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
258. Moffatt, K. 2019. *Troubled Masculinities: Reimagining Urban Men*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
259. Moore, D. 1994. Anthropology Is Dead, Long Live Anthro(a)pology: Poststructuralism, Literary Studies, and Anthropology's "Nervous Present". *Journal of Anthropological Research*. Vol. 50, No. 4.
260. Moore, H. 2014. *Anthropology in theory issues in epistemology*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.
261. Morton, H. My 'Chastity Belt': Avoiding Seduction in Tonga in Kulick, D., Willson, M. 1995. *Taboo, Sex and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*. London: Routledge.
262. Moser, A., Korstjens, I. 2018. Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 3: Sampling, data collection and analysis. *European Journal of General Practice*. 24: 1.
263. Moser, C. 1998. S/M (sodomasochistic) Interactions in Semi – Public Settings. *Journal of Homosexuality*. 36: 2.
264. Mosher & Sirkin, 1984. Measuring a macho personality constellation. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 18(2), pp.150–163.
265. Mosher, C.M., Levitt, H.M., Manley, E. 2006. Layers of Leather. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 51(3), pp.93–123.
266. Mouffe, C., 2005. *On the political*. London; New York: Routledge.
267. Mueller, M. 2018. If all acts of love and pleasure are Her rituals, what about BDSM? Feminist culture wars in contemporary Paganism. *Theology & Sexuality*, 24(1), pp.39–52.
268. Mulhall, A. 2003. In The Field: Notes in Observation in Qualitative Research. *Methodological Issues in Nursing Research*. 41(3).
269. Murphy, M. 2021. The problem with 'preferred pronouns'. <https://www.feministcurrent.com/2021/07/28/the-problem-with-preferred-pronouns/> [accessed: August, 2021]

270. Musser, A.J., 2015. BDSM and the boundaries of criticism: Feminism and neoliberalism in *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *The Story of O*. *Feminist Theory*, 16(2), pp.121-136.
271. Nakkeeran, N. 2016. Is Sampling a Misnomer in Qualitative Research? *Sociological Bulletin*. 65 (1).
272. Nayak, A. and Kehily, M.J., 2013. *Gender, youth and culture: Young masculinities and femininities*. Macmillan International Higher Education.
273. Needham, G. 'Not on public display': the art/porn debate in Attwood, F., Smith, C., McNair, B. 2018. *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality*. Oxon: Routledge.
274. Newmahr, S. 2011. Chaos, Order, and Collaboration: Toward a Feminist Conceptualization of Edgework. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 40(6), pp.682–712.
275. Newmahr, S. 2011. *Playing on the Edge*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
276. Noble, G., 2009. 'Countless acts of recognition': young men, ethnicity and the messiness of identities in everyday life. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 10(8), pp.875-891.
277. O'Neill, R., 2015. Whither critical masculinity studies? Notes on inclusive masculinity theory, postfeminism, and sexual politics. *Men and masculinities*, 18(1), pp.100-120.
278. Öksüzoglu-Güven, G. 2016. Objectivity and Research Ethics in Participant Observation. *The Anthropologist*, 25(1-2), pp.52–59.
279. Ólafsdóttir, K. and Kjaran, J.I., 2019. "Boys in Power": Consent and Gendered Power Dynamics in Sex. *Boyhood Studies*, 12(1), pp.38-56.
280. Onwuegbuzie, A., Leech, N. 2007. Validity and Qualitative Research: An Oxymoron? *Quality and Quantity*, Vol. 41.
281. Oyèwùmí, O. 1997. *The invention of women: making an African sense of western gender discourses*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
282. Paasonen, S., Nikunen, K. and Saarenmaa, L., 2007. Pornification and the Education of Desire. *Pornification: Sex and sexuality in media culture*, pp.1-20.

283. Paechter, C., 2018, May. Rethinking the possibilities for hegemonic femininity: Exploring a Gramscian framework. In *Women's studies international forum* (Vol. 68, pp. 121-128). Pergamon.
284. Palinkas, L., Horwitz, S., Green, C., Wisdom, J., Duan, N., Hoagwood, K. 2015. Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, Vol. 42, No. 5.
285. Parchev, O., Langdrige, D. 2018. BDSM under security: Radical resistance via contingent subjectivities. *Sexualities*, 21(1-2), pp.194–211.
286. Patton, M. 2002. Two Decades of Developments in Qualitative Inquiry: A Personal, Experiential Perspective. *Qualitative Social Work*, Vol. 1(3).
287. Penttinen, E. Providing Security: White Western Feminists Protecting “Other” Women in Haugaard, M., Lentner, H. 2006. *Hegemony and Power: Consensus and Coercion in Contemporary Politics*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
288. Pfadenhauer, M., 2005. Ethnography of scenes. Towards a sociological life-world analysis of (post-traditional) community-building. *Forum qualitative social research*, 6(3).
289. Pitagora, D. 2017. No pain, no gain?: Therapeutic and Relational benefits of subspace in BDSM contexts. *Journal of Positive Sexuality*, 6(6), pp: 44 – 53.
290. Pivec, N., 2015. Drags, Drugs and Dirt: Abjection and Masculinity in Marilyn Manson's music video (s) Aint. *Masculinities: A Journal of Identity and Culture*, (3), pp.105-128.
291. Pliskin, E. 2018. Social An Emotional Intelligence (SEI) in BDSM. *Journal of Positive Sexuality*, Vol. 4 (2).
292. Pliskin, E., 2018. Social and Emotional Intelligence (SEI) in BDSM. *Journal of Positive Sexuality*, 4(2), pp.48-55.
293. Polit, D., Beck, C. 2010. Generalization in quantitative and qualitative research: Myths and strategies. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*. Vol. 47.
294. Ponterotto, J. 2006. Brief Notes on the Origins, Evolution and Meaning of the Qualitative Research Concept of Thick Description. *The Qualitative Report*, Vol. 11, No. 3.

295. Prior, E. 2013. Women's perspectives of BDSM power exchange. *Electronic Journal of Human Sexuality*, 16.
296. Punch, K. 2014. *Social Research*. London: Sage.
297. Quinn, C., Clare, L. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Watson, R., McKenna, H., Cowman, S., Keady, J. 2008. *Nursing Research, Designs and Methods*. Churchill Livingstone: Elsevier.
298. Raadschelders, J. 2011. The Future of the Study of Public Administration: Embedding Research Object and Methodology in Epistemology and Ontology. *Public Administration Review*.
299. Raley, T. Sampling Strategies in Qualitative Research in Flick, U. 2014. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis*. London: Sage.
300. Randles, J., 2018. "Manning up" to be a good father: Hybrid fatherhood, masculinity, and US responsible fatherhood policy. *Gender & Society*, 32(4), pp.516-539.
301. Rankin, K. 2011. Assemblage and the Politics of Thick Description. *City*. Vol. 15, No. 5.
302. Redhead, S. 1993. *Rave off: politics and deviance in contemporary youth culture*. Aldershot, Hants., England ; Brookfield, Vt.: Avebury.
303. Rees, G. and Garcia, J.R., 2017. An investigation into the solitary and interpersonal aspects of sexual object fetishism: A mixed-methods approach. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 8(4), pp.252-267.
304. Relles, S. 2015. A call for Qualitative Methods in Action: Enlisting Positionality as an Enquiry Tool. *Intervention in School and Clinic*. Vol. 51, No. 5.
305. Renz, S., Carrington, J., Badger, T. 2018. Two Strategies for Qualitative Content Analysis: An Intramethod Approach to Triangulation. *Qualitative Health Research*. Vol. 28, No. 5.
306. Ritchie, A., Barker, M. 2005. Feminist SM: A contradiction in terms or a way of challenging traditional gendered dynamics through sexual practice? *Lesbian and Gay Psychology Review* 6(3): 227–239.
307. Rivoli, L. 2015. *Liberation Through Domination: BDSM Culture and Submissive-Role Women*. Student Publications. 318.
308. Roach, C. 2007. *Stripping, Sex and Popular Culture*. New York: Berg.

309. Roach, C. Erotica in Attwood, F., Smith, C., McNair, B. 2018. *The Routledge Companion to Media, Sex and Sexuality*. Oxon: Routledge.
310. Robinson, K., Bansel, P., Denson, N., Ovenden, G., Davies, C. 2014, Growing Up Queer: Issues Facing Young Australians Who are Gender Variant and Sexuality Diverse. Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre, Melbourne.
311. Rogers, M., 2020. Exploring trans men's experiences of intimate partner violence through the lens of cisgenderism. In *Men, masculinities and intimate partner violence* (pp. 112-125). Routledge.
312. Rosewarne, L. 2016. *Intimacy on the Internet : media representation of online connections*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
313. Rubin, G. 2011. Blood Under the Bridge: Reflections on "Thinking Sex". *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 17(1), pp.15–48.
314. Rubin, G. 2011. *Deviations*. Durham: Duke University Press.
315. Rye, B., Serafini, T., Bramberger, T. 2015. Erotophobic or erotophilic: What are young women's attitudes towards BDSM? *Psychology & Sexuality*, 6(4), pp.1–17.
316. Sa'ar, A., 2007. Masculine talk: On the subconscious use of masculine linguistic forms among Hebrew-and Arabic-speaking women in Israel. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 32(2), pp.405-429.
317. Sacher – Masoch, L. 1870 [2012]. *Venus in Furs*. Public domain book, Amazon Kindle.
318. Sagarin, B., Lee, E., Klement, K. 2015. Sadomasochism without Sex? Exploring the Parallels between BDSM and Extreme Rituals. *Journal of Positive Sexuality*, Vol. 1.
319. Saguy, T., Reifen-Tagar, M. and Joel, D., 2021. The gender-binary cycle: the perpetual relations between a biological-essentialist view of gender, gender ideology, and gender-labelling and sorting. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B*, 376(1822).
320. Said, E. 1983. *Orientalism* Reconsidered. Race and Class. 2
321. Said, E.W. 2003. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin.
322. Salzinger, L., 2016. Re-marking men: Masculinity as a terrain of the neoliberal economy. *Critical Historical Studies*, 3(1), pp.1-25.
323. Sanders, T. Researching Sex works: Dynamics, Difficulties and Decisions in
Hobbs, D., Wright, R. 2006. *The SAGE Book of Fieldwork*. London: SAG

324. Sanders-McDonagh, E., Peyrefitte, M. 2018. Immoral geographies and Soho's sex shops: exploring spaces of sexual diversity in London. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 25(3), pp.351–367.
325. Sanford, V. Excavations of the Heart: Reflections on Truth, Memory, and structured of Understanding in Sanford, V., Angel – Ajani, A. 2006. *Engaged Observer: Anthropology, Advocacy and Activism*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
326. Saunders, B., Sim, J., Kingstone, T., Baker, S., Waterfield, J., Bartlam, B., Burroughs, H., Jinks, C. 2018. Saturation in Qualitative Research: Exploring its conceptualization and operationalization. *Quality and Quantity*, Vol. 52, No. 4.
327. Savage, M., Menegatos, W., Roberto, L. 2017. When Do Friends Prevent Friends from Hooking Up Intoxicated? An Examination of Sex Differences and Hypothetical Intoxication in Peer Interventions. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, 46(6), pp.1819–1829.
328. Schiro, A. 1981. 'Play Cosmetics for Children: Dissenting Voices are Heard'. New York Times, 21 February.
329. Schneider, L. 2020. Sexual violence during research: How the unpredictability of fieldwork and the right to risk collide with academic bureaucracy and expectations *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol. 40(2) 173–193
330. Schweder, R. 2007. The Resolute Irresolution of Clifford Geertz. *Common Knowledge*. Vol. 13, No. 2 – 3.
331. Scotland, J. 2012. Exploring the Philosophical Underpinnings of Research: Relating Ontology and Epistemology to the Methodology and Methods of the Scientific, Interpretive, and Critical Research Paradigms. *English Language Teaching*. Vol. 5, No. 9.
332. Scott, C. 2015. *Thinking kink: the collision of BDSM, feminism and popular culture*. McFarland.
333. Scott, C., 2015. *Thinking kink: the collision of BDSM, feminism and popular culture*. McFarland.
334. Seidler, V., 2006. *Transforming masculinities: Men, cultures, bodies, power, sex and love*. Routledge.

335. Seidler, V.J., 2006. *Young men and masculinities: Global cultures and intimate lives*. Zed Books.
336. Serano, J. 2016. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. New York: Hachette Books Group.
337. Serano, J., 2012. Reclaiming femininity. *Transfeminist perspectives in and beyond transgender and gender studies*, pp.170-183.
338. Shagrir, L. 2017. *Journey to Ethnographic Research*. Cham: Springer International Publishing: Imprint: Springer.
339. Shah, A. 2017. Ethnography? *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 7(1), pp.45–59.
340. Sharma, G. 2017. Pros and Cons of different sampling techniques. *International Journal of Applied Research*. Vol. 3 (7).
341. Sheppard, E. 2019. Chronic Pain as fluid, BDSM as Control. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 39 (2).
342. Sheppard, E., 2019. Chronic pain as fluid, BDSM as control. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 39(2).
343. Simic, Z. 2011. Anti-raunch feminism: An Australian case study. 2nd European Conference on Politics and Gender.
344. Simon, W. 1996. *Postmodern sexualities*. New York: Routledge.
345. Simula, B.L., Sumerau, J., 2019. The use of gender in the interpretation of BDSM. *Sexualities*, 22(3), pp.452–477.
346. Sloan, J. 2015. Ace of (BDSM) clubs: Building asexual relationships through BDSM practice. *Sexualities*, 18(5-6), pp.548–563.
347. Smith, C. 2007. Designed for Pleasure: Style, indulgence and accessorised sex. *Cultural Studies*. Vol. 10 (2), pp: 167 – 184.
348. Smith, C. 2018. Policy, politics and porn. *Sexualities*, 21(8), pp.1351–1359.
349. Smith, C. Pleasing Intensities: Masochism and Affective Pleasure in Porn Short Fictions in Attwood, F. 2009. *Mainstreaming of sex*. London: I. B Tauris and Co Ltd.
350. Smith, J., Flowers, P., Michael, L. 2009. *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*. London: Sage Publications.
351. Smith, J., Noble, H. 2014. Bias and Research. *Evidence Based Nursing*, Vol. 17, No. 4.

352. Snyder-Hall, R.C. 2010. Third-Wave Feminism and the Defense of "Choice." *Perspectives on Politics*, 8(1), pp.255–261.
353. Sonnet, E. 1999. 'Erotic Fiction by Women for Women': The Pleasures of Post-Feminist Heterosexuality. *Sexualities*, 2(2), pp.167–187.
354. Spanier, G. 1975. Sexualization and Premarital Sexual Behavior. *The Family Coordinator*, Vol. 24 (1), pp. 33-41.
355. Steffen, M., 2017. Doing fieldwork after Henrietta Schmerler: On sexual violence and blame in anthropology. *American Ethnologist*, 13.
356. Stiles, B.L. & Clark, R.E., 2011. BDSM: A Subcultural Analysis of Sacrifices and Delights. *Deviant Behaviour*, 32(2), pp.158–189.
357. Straw, W., 1991. Systems of articulation, logics of change: Communities and scenes in popular music. *Cultural studies*, 5(3), pp.368–388.
358. Stryker, S. and Bettcher, T.M., 2016. Introduction Trans/Feminisms. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 3(1-2), pp.5-14.
359. Stuart, J. 1994. "Patriarchy" Reconsidered. *Journal of Men's Studies*, 2(4), p.309.
360. Thomas, D.S. 1992. *The Marquis de Sade*. London: Allison & Busby.
361. Thomassen, L. 2016. Hegemony, populism and democracy: Laclau and Mouffe today. *Revista Espanola de Ciencia Politica*, Vol. 40, pp: 161 – 176.
362. Tiidenberg, K. 2019. Playground in memoriam: Missing the pleasures of NSFW Tumblr, *Porn Studies*, Vol.6: 3, pp: 363 – 371.
363. Todd, Z. 2016. An Indigenous Feminist's take on the Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' is just another word for colonialism. *Journal of Historical Sociology*. Vol. 29, No. 1.
364. Toomela, A. 2011. Travel Into a Fairy Land: A Critique of Modern Qualitative and Mixed Methods Psychologies. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioural Sciences*. Vol. 45(1).
365. Trotter, R. 2012. Qualitative research sample design and sample size: Resolving and unresolved issues and inferential imperatives. *Preventive Medicine*. Vol, 55.
366. Tuck, G. The Mainstream of Masturbation: Autoeroticism and Consumer Capitalism in Attwood, F. 2009. *Mainstreaming of sex*. London: I. B Tauris and Co Ltd.

367. Turley, E. 2011. 'It started when I barked once when I was licking his boots!': a descriptive phenomenological study of the everyday experience of BDSM. *Psychology and Sexuality*. Vol. 2, No. 2.
368. Turley, E. 2016. 'Like nothing I've ever felt before': understanding consensual BDSM as embodied experience. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 7(2), pp.1–14.
369. Turley, E.L., 2022. 'I feel so much better in myself': Exploring meaningful non-erotic outcomes of BDSM participation. *Sexualities*.
370. Turner, T. 2009. The Crisis of Late Structuralism. Perspectivism and Animism: Rethinking Culture, Nature, Spirit and Bodiliness. *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*, Vol. 7 (1).
371. Tziallas, E. 2016. Pornophilia: Porn gifs, fandoms, circuitries, *Porn Studies*, Vol. 6: 3, pp. 311 – 313.
372. Vance, C., Snitow, A. 1984. Toward a Conversation about Sex in Feminism: A Modest Proposal. *Signs*, Vol.10 (1), pp: 126 – 135.
373. Vilkin, E. and Sprott, R., 2021. Consensual non-monogamy among kink-identified adults: Characteristics, relationship experiences, and unique motivations for polyamory and open relationships. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 50(4), pp.1521-1536.
374. Vokey, M., Tefft, B., Tysiaczny, C. 2013. An Analysis of Hyper-Masculinity in Magazine Advertisements. *Sex Roles*, 68(9), pp.562–576.
375. Waling, A., 2019. Problematizing 'toxic' and 'healthy' masculinity for addressing gender inequalities. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 34(101), pp.362-375.
376. Waling, A., 2019. Rethinking masculinity studies: Feminism, masculinity, and poststructural accounts of agency and emotional reflexivity. *The journal of men's studies*, 27(1), pp.89-107.
377. Walker, C. and Roberts, S., 2018. Masculinity, labour and neoliberalism: reviewing the field. In *Masculinity, Labour, and Neoliberalism* (pp. 1-28). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
378. Watson, A.E., Till, K.E. Ethnography and participant observation In Delyser, D., Herbert, S., Aitken, S., Crang, M., McDowell, L. 2010. The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Geography. *SAGE Publications Inc*.

379. Watson, R., McKenna, H., Cowman, S., Keady, J. 2008. *Nursing Research Design and Methods*. Churchill Livingstone: Elsevier.
380. Weedon, C. 1996. *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory*. Cambridge: Blackwell Pub.
381. Weinberg, J. D. 2016. *Consensual violence: Sex, sports, and the politics of injury*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
382. Weiss, M. 2006. Mainstreaming Kink. *Journal of Homosexuality*, Vol. 50, No. 2 – 3.
383. Weiss, M. 2011. *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*. Durham: Duke University Press.
384. White, B. 2007. Clifford Geertz: Singular Genius of Interpretive Anthropology. *Legacies*. Vol. 38 (6).
385. Williams, J., 2016. Sadoomasochism to BDSM: Discourse across disciplines. *Limina: A Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies*, 22(1), pp.67-83.
386. Williams, M. 2000. Interpretivism and Generalizations. *Sociology*, Vol. 34 (2).
387. Williams, M.L., Burnap, P., Sloan, L., Jessop, C. and Lepps, H. 2017. Users' views of ethics in social media research: Informed consent, anonymity, and harm. In *The ethics of online research*. Emerald Publishing Limited.
388. Wittig, M., 1992. *The straight mind: and other essays*. Beacon Press.
389. Woan, S., 2007. White sexual imperialism: A theory of Asian feminist jurisprudence. *Wash. & Lee J. Civil Rts. & Soc. Just.*, 14, p.275.
390. Woltersdorff, V. 2012. Masochistic self-shattering between destructiveness and productivity. *Critical Studies*, 36, pp.133–151.
391. Zahn, R., 2018. *Productive Paddles and Productive Power: An Exploration of Transgender Individuals' Negotiation of Identity Through BDSM Practices*. Minnesota State University: Mankato.
392. Zhang, Y., Wildemuth, B. Unstructured Interviews in Wildemuth, B. 2009. *Applications of Social Research Methods to Questions in Information and Library Sciences*. Denver: Libraries Unlimited.
393. Zussman, M., Pierce, A. 1998. Shifts of Consciousness in Consensual S/M, Bondage, and Fetish Play. *Anthropology of Consciousness*, 9(4), pp.15–38.

