

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND GERMAN STUDIES

Leatherwomen: Decriminalising BDSM

**A review on the linguistic and pragmatic changes of
BDSM concepts**

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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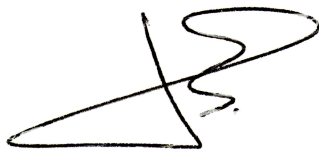
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Abstract

The BDSM community had been criminalised, pathologised and medicalised, by the influence of stigma and societal perceptions. In recent years, the efforts of queer S/M organizations have facilitated the demedicalisation and depathologisation of these practices. This paper aimed to explore the semantic and pragmatic shifts associated with BDSM terminology while advocating for the decriminalization of these practices. A review of the community's historical background underscored the significant contributions of queer-feminist organizations, such as Samois, in transforming the narrative surrounding BDSM, fostering empowerment, and contesting negative stereotypes. Through the analysis of terminology and its cultural consequences, the study emphasised the community's growth and evolution. The results demonstrated how language can both mirror and shape societal attitudes toward these preferences by contending that they should be acknowledged as a valid expression of sexual autonomy rather than a pathological condition. Ultimately, this research contributes to the ongoing dialogues about sexual rights, inclusivity, and the necessity of recognizing diverse sexual identities in modern society, as well as paving the way for future academic investigations.

Keywords: BDSM, linguistics, decriminalisation, pragmatic analysis, feminist organisations, sexual liberation, consent.

1. Introduction

The non-normative sexual activity known as BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Domination, Sadism, Submission, and Masochism) has been pathologized and demonized for years. In fact, this sexual practice was first known as *Sexual Masochism* or *Sexual Sadism*, psychiatric concepts created to classify those who “preferred (...) to be humiliated, bound, beaten, or otherwise made to suffer (...) in order to produce sexual excitement” (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1980, p. 275) and, in the case of *Sexual Sadism*, those who “on a consenting partner bodily injury that is extensive, permanent, or possibly mortal is inflicted in order to achieve sexual excitement” (APA, p. 274). As a matter of fact, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Third Edition (DMS-3), published 4 decades ago, included these sexual practices as “disorder” or “condition” (APA, pp. 273-274).

Although, in its current edition (5th ed., Text Revision; DSM-5-TR; APA, 2022) there is a section mentioning ‘Sexual Masochism Disorder’ and ‘Sexual Sadism Disorder’, the diagnostic criteria and the differential diagnosis suffered a slight change due to the progression of studies and scientific acknowledgement regarding the normality of these preferences. First, Sexual Masochism Disorder involves recurrent arousal from “being humiliated, beaten, bound, or otherwise made to suffer”, with “distress or impairment” (APA, 2022, p. 789) over at least six months. If these impulses do not cause distress or interfere with functioning, the disorder diagnosis is not warranted. On the other hand, Sexual Sadism Disorder involves “recurrent and intense sexual arousal from the physical or psychological suffering of another person” over at least six months, causing “significant distress” (APA, p. 791) or harm to others. A diagnosis requires acting on these urges with a nonconsenting person or experiencing distress or impairment due to the

urges. Therefore, and in contrast to the definitions of DMS-3, both disorders emphasize the importance of consent, distress, and/or functional impairment in diagnosis, accepting and normalizing BDSM practices in the realms of communication, consent, and safety.

Furthermore, despite these practices being ancestral, the origins of BDSM as a term date back to 1991 (Oxford English Dictionary [OED], n.d.a). Due to societal changes, the emergence of an umbrella term encompasses consensual and mutual sexual practices that deviate from conventional norms. Together with a multitude of subcategories, the term created a safe and coordinated space in which practitioners and non-practitioners undertake their kinks¹, paraphilias² and fetishes³ in the realms and limits of morality and ethics. In addition, it is important to understand that owing to practitioners, BDSM culture has a very descriptive jargon to define roles, relationships, and activities (Brown, 2010, p. 10).

Ultimately, this paper aims to deliver a brief historical context for BDSM while also highlighting the organizations that have played a significant role in the development of its associated language. Next, I will identify 6 distinct terms related to the decriminalization of the community to investigate their meanings and usage within the frameworks of pragmatics and semantics. For this purpose, data collection and article information seeking are key for the development and conclusion of this paper.

¹ Slang. Unconventional sexual preferences or behaviour (Random House Unabridged Dictionary, n.d.).

² A pattern of recurring sexually arousing mental imagery or behaviour that involves unusual and especially socially unacceptable sexual practices (Merriam-Webster, n.d.c).

³ An object or bodily part whose real or fantasied presence is psychologically necessary for sexual gratification and that is an object of fixation to the extent that it may interfere with complete sexual expression (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a).

2. Historical context

Understanding the shifts in the BDSM community over the last fifty years is essential for analysing the evolution of its terminology. As my study centres on Leatherwomen, it will delve into the historical development of lesbian and bisexual S/M (Sadism and Masochism) groups and organizations, while also recognizing the essential input from gay S/M organizations. The geographical emphasis of this essay will be on the S/M community in the United States, as the strong association with the English language and the country's extensive reach are noteworthy.

2.1. Origins of BDSM

Ancient literature reveals that activities now linked to BDSM were part of rituals dedicated to Ištar (Arcane, 2020), a Mesopotamian deity representing fertility, sexuality, and war (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). These ceremonial practices featured a power dynamic, with Ištar asserting her domination over God Ebiḫ (Arcane, 2020), a Mesopotamian divinity associated with the Hamrin Mountains, which are now situated in Iraq. The rites were derived from the ancient myth surrounding Ištar and Ebiḫ (Mark, 2023). Accordingly, textual evidence reveals the existence of BDSM practices since approximately 3000 BC.

As we traverse through the realms of Tarquinia, Pompeii, the Kama Sutra, courtly love, and French literature, we arrive at the period following World War II (1939-1945) in the United States, during which *leather* evolved into a key term among gay individuals to signify a particular fetish. In the aftermath of World War II, a considerable number of homosexual men and women engaged with fellow members of the LGBT+ community, resulting in the establishment of gay leathermen collectives in cities such as New York, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. During this period, practitioners created more

leather and motorcycle clubs in order to satiate the necessity of having a private space, also, they initiated the Mister Leather Contest. In fact, Eric Rofes, a contributor to the book *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, and Practice*, describes the importance of these clubs and conferences:

A friend recently asked me why I join leather groups and attend the National Leather Association's Living in Leather Conference annually. My answer was simple. I participate because these organizations do the work of making the world safe for kinky people. They make it possible for me to survive a life in the gay and lesbian community. (Rofes, 1991, quoted in Meltsner, 2017, p. 55)

At the moment, BDSM was called S/M or D/S (Dominance and Submission, or Discipline and Sadism). The early 1980s saw the inclusion of lesbians as a vital component of the leather community. Besides, they engaged in the creation of leather clubs, as well as reunions to organize and promote safe, sane, and consensual⁴ sex among women. The release of *Coming to Power* by the lesbian-feminist organization Samois in 1981 significantly enhanced awareness and acceptance of BDSM practices within the lesbian community. By the decade of the 1990s, the leather communities for both men and women had stepped into the spotlight, playing a crucial part in the kink culture and the sexual revolution, including the "Sex Wars". It was not until 1991 when the first recorded mention of the term BDSM appeared in a Usenet⁵ post, "SO [*i.e.* significant other] doesn't like BDSM; knows I like it, knows what I do (generally)" (Quarterhorse Says, 1991, quoted in OED, n.d.a).

⁴ Foundational ethical framework in BDSM and kink communities which emerged in the 1980s (Kinktionary, 2024).

⁵ Online platform created before the World Wide Web where users could share messages and archives.

2.2. Key organisations that shaped the terminology of the leather community

After the 1980s, LGBT+ kinky communities and groups started publishing and distributing books, articles, manuals and lists of vocabulary in order to give an extensive education on BDSM to practitioners and non-practitioners. These publications represented the foundational framework upon which lesbian and non-lesbian BDSM organizations depend, as they contained extensive information regarding terminology, prevalent practices within the community, and established codes. For instance, lesbian and bisexual groups such as Samois, Society of Janus, and Lesbian Sex Mafia published lists and handbooks full of firsthand experiences in order to make other women feel viewed and safe. In particular, Samois published in 1981 *Coming to Power. Writings and Graphics on Lesbian S/M*, an anthology of lesbian S/M essays, poetry, fiction, memoir, and photography (Leather Hall of Fame [LHF], 2019), becoming a founding work of the lesbian BDSM movement.

Within this text, Patrick Califia and the team of editors played a pivotal role in shaping the discussions on BDSM, lesbian identity, and feminist perspectives. Through its linguistic and structural choices, the book articulates and legitimizes the experiences of women participating in consensual power exchange and sexual discovery. By utilizing inclusive and empowering terminology, the text foregrounds the identities and experiences of lesbians, simultaneously asserting the validity of BDSM as a choice that supports empowerment. Consequently, this approach eliminates stigmatizing language and instead embraces terms such as *power* and *submission* within affirmative frameworks.

Moreover, the application of descriptive language significantly illustrates contexts and relationships, facilitating a clearer understanding of abstract principles, such as safety and sanity (Samois, 1981). This process clarifies BDSM activities, demystifying

misconceptions associated with them. The authors intentionally engage with, and challenge established mainstream and feminist views on BDSM through a linguistic framework that redefines consent, agency, and power structures. Thus, it reconceptualizes these elements as pillars of individual empowerment and self-direction, rather than as sources of constraint.

3. Analysis

After establishing a brief historical background and briefly discussing the advancements and reinterpretations in BDSM terminology, I will provide a pragmatic and semantic analysis of 6 terms that played a crucial role in reshaping the history and practices of BDSM.

3.1. Introduction to Pragmatic and Semantic Analyses

Pragmatic and semantic analyses are crucial for comprehending the nuances of meaning in communication (Kroeger, 2022). Focusing on the inherent meaning of words, phrases, and sentences, semantic analysis delves into the interactions among linguistic components that facilitate the expression of propositions and thoughts (Salloum, Khan & Shaalan, 2020). For instance, semantic analysis considers how a sentence represents a specific situation within a world restrained by linguistic rules.

In a different approach, pragmatic analysis goes beyond straightforward meanings, focusing on the role of context in shaping understanding. Hence, while semantics deals with the inherent meanings of linguistic elements, pragmatics explores the dynamic interactions between speakers and listeners as they use language to meet their communicative intentions (Kroeger, 2022, p. 4). This approach takes into account aspects including the intentions of the speaker, collective knowledge, and cultural expectations,

thereby facilitating the search for phenomena such as deixis and the functions of speech acts. Through pragmatic analysis, scholars establish a connection between the semantics of language and its practical implementation, showcasing how language interacts with its surrounding circumstances.

3.2. Analyses of words

3.2.1. Pain

Defined by Samois in their publication of *What Color is your Handkerchief?* in 1979, *pain* was:

A sensation usually intended to create an avoidance reaction. In an erotic context, humans become less sensitive to pain as they become more aroused. In an S/M context, pain is often deliberately created by applying stress to the body. Because of its subjective nature, it is difficult to place a negative moral value on pain. Also: body stress, intense sensations. (These terms are used to distinguish pain in a medical sense from pain in an erotic sense) (Samois, 1979, p. 6)

In contrast, the meaning defined by the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) in 1979 was "An unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage, or described in terms of such damage" (Raja et al., 2020, p. 1977). Plus, in the definition's note, the IASP included that *pain* was always subjective, thus, each individual learned the word's use via early-life encounters with harm. Moreover, and crucial for this analysis, the note includes that experiences that mimic pain, such as pricking, but are not unpleasant should not be classified as pain (Raja et al., p. 1977).

The variation in the definition and interpretation of the same term arises from the specific context in which pain is experienced. In the framework of Samois', the authors acknowledge that pain is "usually intended to create an avoidance reaction", however, within an erotic setting, pain is perceived as consensual, leading to arousal, and becoming

less intrusive when the body is charged with sexual excitement. According to the second definition provided by the IASP, pain is identified as “an unpleasant sensory” experience, thereby removing the element of consent and contrasting it with the sexual perspective given by Samois. Despite having two different definitions and connotations of the same word, it is important to note that the feminist organisation did not ignore the negative implications of *pain*, although they explicitly noted that “it is difficult to place a negative moral value on pain”. Chiefly, they primarily acknowledged that *pain* carries an unfavourable connotation, however, they argued that due to the subjective nature of the term, particularly within a sadomasochistic framework, it became challenging to categorize it as inherently negative (Samois, 1979, p. 6). In other words, they introduced a context-specific definition.

The definition of pain in the IASP was last revised in 2020 after four decades, changing slightly into a more precise definition, “An unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with, or resembling that associated with, actual or potential tissue damage” (Raja et al., p. 1977). It could seem that there were no significant modifications, nevertheless, the addition of “or resembling that associated with” is directly contrary to the prior definition, generalising the concept of the term and embracing the inclusion of all kinds of experiences with pain. Besides, in the definition’s note, the IASP specifies that psychological, biological, and social factors influence the personal experience of pain (Raja et al., p. 1977). Taking into consideration this observation, we would say that erotic pain is, by definition, influenced by psychological, biological, and social factors, thus, contemplating the sense of consent and safety, we would not recognize it as “unpleasant” sensations. Therefore, the definition proposed by the IASP lacks in contemplating all realities and situations, considering they rely on the subjective and personal sense of pain.

On the other hand, the newest definition of *pain* in the BDSM context is divided into two updated terms, *Good pain*, and *Bad pain* (Pantry, 2018). Considering that the old term interpreted by Samois entails polysemy, with pain having two different meanings, in this case, we observe a semantic shift of the old concept into new ameliorated (*good pain*) and pejorative (*bad pain*) terms. *Good pain* is defined as “pain that is mutually agreed upon, desired or permitted by the submissive partner to be experienced, and seen by them as of enjoyment or value” (Pantry, 2018). And *Bad pain* is defined as “pain which is outside hard limits, non-mutual or non-valued, not wished for, and of limited or no value in this context” (Pantry, 2018). Indeed, placing the emphasis on the difference between pleasant and consensual, and unpleasant and non-valued. However, as stated before, the definition is not new *per se* but transformed into two new and distinguished concepts.

Above all, as noted by Dubois (1981), it is key to remember that terms provided in glossaries, dictionaries or periodicals are conventionalized and should not be viewed as comprehensive representations of language. This perspective is particularly relevant given that language and educational practices are in a state of continuous evolution. In other words, the BDSM community may have been using these terms much prior to its documentation, and probably, the evidence of the general usage led to their “official” registration in BDSM community glossaries.

3.2.2. Safe Word / Safeword / Safe-word

Defined by Samois (1979), a *Safe Word* was: “A code word partners involved in s/M⁶ sex agree to use to stop the action immediately“ (p. 7), which means a consensual agreement

⁶ slave/Master. The lack of capitalization in the first word serves to underscore the submissive connotations.

in which each participant decides a word, usually aleatory and non-confusing, to use it (mostly submissive partners) whether the session becomes uncomfortable, someone stops wanting to continue or if there is a disagreement in the sexual activity. Indeed, the term's definition entry in *What Color is your Handkerchief* is the earliest known mention of the word in printed documents (OED, n.d.c), although the concept was used within other terms, such as *code word* (Samois, 1981, p. 187), *code action* (Califia, 1981, p. 31) and *key words* (Watts the Safeword, 2023). The latter term was coined by Gayle S. Rubin in the Society of Janus, "starting with the foundation for safety within the kink community" (Watts the Safeword, 2023). Therefore, *safe word* was a derivative term of code words, code actions and key words.

As said by Watts the Safeword (2023), a *Safeword* is

A word, a phrase, (...) a hand gesture, a tapping sensation (...) that stop a scene as it is happening in case you need to take a pause (...). Safewords are generally agreed upon between the two parties or more that are involved in a scene. (...) It can be kink or not and it's something that shouldn't be very easy to say within a scene but something that should be easily said during the scene.

As can be seen, the definition of safe words has remained largely consistent over time, however, two significant changes have occurred.

First, safe words were primarily associated with sexual practices, particularly within BDSM contexts. In contrast, contemporary usage has expanded to encompass non-kinky environments, indicating a broader evolution of safety protocols beyond BDSM. For instance, in neurodivergent communities, safe words are employed to communicate when an individual is experiencing overstimulation and requires a break, as this user of Reddit comments:

For example. I come home from work and it was a lot. My SO is enthusiastic to see me (and I'm too) but I am overstimulated and really need a moment. So to avoid reacting out of emotion, I say "highway." This way he understands and I have a moment to calm my system. (Anonymous, 2023).

This shift reflects a growing recognition of the importance of respecting personal boundaries and sensory experiences, a principle that is increasingly applicable beyond the confines of kink-related communities.

Secondly, a particular aspect highlighted in the initial definition provided by Samois warrants attention. Many definitions from the late 1970s and early 1980s predominantly associate safewords with submissives and bottoms, implying that dominants are either immune to discomfort or perceived as too resilient to experience vulnerabilities. In contrast, contemporary perspectives assert that “safewords are not just for submissives or bottoms; dominants and tops need safewords too” (Anonymous, 2013). Furthermore, akin to the previous discussion, the importance of respecting boundaries is equal to that of communicating them. It is essential to involve all participants in the sexual encounter to ensure that all parties feel secure and comfortable. For this reason, the utility of safewords has significantly increased, leading to their evolution in both definition and application.

3.2.3. Bondage

As defined by Samois (1979), *bondage* was: “Physically restraining someone to increase sexual excitement. Can be done with ropes, leather bondage cuffs, chains, silk ties, etc. Also: A psychological state of submission of one sex partner to the other(s)” (p. 5). But in fact, bondage was not only related to sex, it was related to serfdom and also to fashion (OED, n.d.b).

The exploration of the origins of the concept leads us to ancient Japan, where the practice of Kinbaku was prevalent. According to Gardenour (2022), the significance of rope binding in Japanese history encompasses both spiritual and physical dimensions, historically linked to punishment, torture, and public humiliation (p. 201). Initially, this

practice was predominantly employed for non-sexual punishment, typically involving men criminals. However, the artist Seito Ito later transformed this practice by creating artistic representations that involved the restraint of tormented women (Gardenour, p. 201). Following World War II, this imagery began to permeate Western culture, with early Hollywood romanticizing bounding and underground fetish magazines showcasing Kinbaku through illustrations and photography (Demasque Magazine, 2018; Gardenour, 2022). Notably, the term *Shibari* emerged in the 1990s as a widely accepted descriptor for the sexual bondage art associated with Kinbaku (Demasque Magazine, 2018).

Nowadays, the Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) says that *bondage* is:

- (1) the state of being another person's slave (= a person who is owned by them and has to work for them)
- (2) the activity of tying parts of a person's body so that they cannot move in order to get or give sexual pleasure

The analysis indicates that there has been minimal transformation in recent years, largely attributable to the significant evolution of this term over the past century. *Bondage* is defined as the act of restraining an individual, whether through physical means or psychological influence. In contrast, Kinbaku and Shibari specifically refer to the artistic practice of using ropes for restraint, with Kinbaku originating from a martial arts perspective and Shibari emerging within a sexual framework. It can be inferred that the transition to a broader definition was primarily instigated by Western cultural influences, which were subsequently embraced by BDSM communities as a means of enhancing pleasure for both the dominant and submissive participants.

3.2.4. SAM (Smart-Ass Masochist)

According to Leather Hall of Fame (n.d.), the term SAM (Smart-Ass Masochist) was first introduced by Jack Jackson, a professional Master and a member of The Eulenspiegel Society (TES), which is recognized as the first BDSM organization established in the United States in 1971. As stated by Viola Johnson in LHF (n.d.), during a TES meeting in 1975, Jackson was accompanied by his partner, in a slave/Master relationship, Violetta, who made an offhand remark that elicited laughter from the other slaves present. In response to the laughter, Jackson referred to Violetta as a “smart-ass”. She then misheard him, thinking he had said “masochist”, to which Jackson replied, “alright, (...) you’re a smart-ass masochist” (LHF, n.d.). This exchange led to the adoption of the term among kinky slaves, who began to use it with sense of humour and affectionate pride.

Samois (1979) subsequently incorporated a definition of *SAM* into their glossary in *What Color is your Handkerchief?* characterizing it as: “Abbreviation for smart-assed masochist. A certain smart-alecky, provocative style of soliciting attention from tops” (p. 7). This definition reflects the original concept, wherein a submissive partner engages in behaviour to elicit attention from their dominant counterpart, indicating that there have been no significant alterations to its meaning over time.

In contemporary discussions, according to Anoeses (2023), is essential to recognize that not all submissive players (SAMs) are classified as masochists. However, they do exhibit a shared characteristic of being provocateurs towards their Dominants, a behaviour that may be interpreted as a form of “bratting”. Some SAMs find motivation in the punishment they receive, while others take pleasure in the pain they endure. It is crucial to distinguish this term from *brat*, which refers to individuals who engage in playful, cheeky, and disobedient behaviour towards their partners, typically in a more

light-hearted context (Anoeses, 2023). While submissives are generally more inclined to identify as brats, Dominants can also exhibit bratty tendencies.

Eventually, the definition of SAMs has remained unchanged, however, the concept has evolved to encompass a new behavioural approach characterized by more play and rebellious demeanour. In contrast to the traditional understanding, which emphasizes obedience and intelligence aimed at pleasing oneself, this new interpretation embraces a form of playful disobedience and the use of impact play elements, such as paddles. This shift may be attributed to the original concept being rooted in the experiences of slaves, who were conditioned to adhere to strict obedience and servitude to their masters. Over time, the term has likely been broadened to include various subcommunities within BDSM, where individuals engaging childish play have adopted the underlying ideas while diverging from the original terminology, ultimately leading to the creation of a new term that retains similar but not exact connotations.

3.2.5. Dual

The term *dual*, which carries a sexual connotation in the BDSM context, appears to be absent from significant English dictionaries as well as various online lexicons. However, it is noteworthy that Samois (1979) included this term in their influential work, *What Color is Your Handkerchief?*. In this context, a dual is defined as “a woman who is willing to play either role in an S/M encounter, depending on her own and her partner(s) needs”, and is also referred to as “switchable” (p. 5). The synonym *switchable* will be relevant in the subsequent discussions. Furthermore, the lack of inclusion of *dual* in English dictionaries may be attributed to its association with a relatively niche subculture within BDSM.

The Old Guard, a pioneering movement of the leather community in the United States, which emerged in the 1950s and in which only male homosexuals participated

at that time, rejected the acceptance of the switch phenomenon. It was not until the 1990s, with the appearance of the New Guard, that switches were admitted as full members of the BDSM community, although a certain resistance persists in many parts of the scene. (Pérez, 2015)

Given that duals or switches naturally engage in both dominant and submissive roles during sexual activities, the Old Guard's stance against the concept of being "in the middle" effectively marginalized these individuals. This phenomenon mirrors the societal incorporation of the term *bisexual*, which similarly faced challenges in gaining acceptance.

The absence of the term *dual* in English dictionaries has led to the predominance of the term *switch*. A switch is defined as "someone who takes on both dominant-type roles and submissive-type roles during BDSM activities", with its origins tracing back to the 20th century (Murray & Murrell, 1989, quoted in Bennet, 2024, p. 5). Other less frequently employed terms include *switchable*, *dual*, *middle* (Murray & Murrell, 1989, quoted in Bennet, 2024, p. 5), and *versatile* (Spengler, 1977; Breslow et al., 1985; Moser & Levitt, 1987, quoted in Bennet, 2024, p. 5). Determining the original term used to describe this concept is challenging, as the literature on BDSM often fails to accurately reflect the realities of the time it was produced. Furthermore, when it does, it typically represents only a limited perspective. Ultimately, it is noteworthy that the concept of switching was marginalized until the 1990s, when it began to gain acceptance within BDSM communities.

This gradual acceptance suggests that the presence of switches is essential for inclusivity. As noted by Sótano BDSM (n.d.), "although there is no quantitative research on how common the BDSM switch dynamic is, becoming a BDSM switch has become quite common these days". However, there is indeed some quantitative research available regarding the prevalence of the BDSM switch dynamic. Bennet (2024) indicated that data

collected from various academic studies demonstrates that “switches clearly comprise a substantial proportion of BDSM participants” (p. 5).

Chiefly, the term *switch* has gained significant traction within the sadomasochistic community, largely due to the persistent presence of switches and the proliferation of literature, including various forms of the same concept and quantitative research focused on BDSM practitioners. This evolution and integration of terminology and experiences are essential for fostering acceptance of diverse practices, as well as for acknowledging and respecting individual boundaries and preferences.

3.2.6. S&M / SM / S/M / Sadomasochism

Sadomasochism is a portmanteau of *sadism* and *masochism*. These terms possess a distinct historical background that sets them apart from other related concepts mentioned above. Both terms are classified as eponyms, as they originate from actual names.

First, Lleshi (2022) posits that sadism represented the fundamental state of humanity in the prehistoric era of hunter-gatherers. Similarly, Nietzsche (2012) remarked that cruelty constituted one of the earliest forms of pleasure during their celebrations (pp. 25-26). The term *sadism* is derived from Count Donatien A.F. de Sade (1740-1814), who gained infamy for the brutal sexual acts depicted in his literary works (Harper, n.d.b).

Secondly, as noted by Harper (n.d.a), *masochism* was defined in 1892 as “sexual pleasure in being hurt or abused”. The term derives from the German word *Masochismus*, which was introduced in 1883 by German neurologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing. He adopted the term from the name of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1836-1895), an Austrian novelist and utopian socialist who articulated his experiences of submissive sexuality in his work *Venus im Pelz* (1870). As mentioned before, *masochism* is an eponym, and it is particularly interesting that the term began to be utilized during the lifetime of Sacher-

Masoch, who passed away in 1895, with its first recorded use in print dating back to 1892 (Merriam-Webster, n.d.b).

According to Lleshi (2022), the phenomenon of sadism and masochism may have emerged during ancient times when cruelty was esteemed as a paramount virtue. In this context, the acceptance of cruelty, which implies a form of obedience, was similarly regarded as highly valuable. Furthermore, the concept of sexual masochism may be traced back to the historical violence perpetrated by men against women during sexual encounters, a trait that has been a longstanding characteristic of early human societies (Lleshi, 2022).

Later on, the classification of Sexual Sadism and Sexual Masochism as a pathological condition has been addressed by both the DSM and the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). In their commentary, Moser and Kleinplatz (2005) examined criteria used to determine whether certain behaviours should be deemed pathological. They argued that, in the absence of a clear theoretical framework, or empirical research defining “normal” sexuality, it becomes all too simple to label unconventional practices as pathological, influenced by dominant social attitudes. Sadomasochism, in particular, is prone to stigmatization in cultures that are uncomfortable with the notion of sexual pleasure as an intrinsic good. Furthermore, there is a lack of evidence indicating that S/M, regardless of its prevalence, leads to personal distress or dysfunction among participants (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2005, p. 259).

The contemporary definition of sadomasochism, as articulated by Eldridge (2024), describes it as the experience of pleasure, frequently of a sexual nature, derived from the infliction of physical or psychological pain on another individual, on oneself or both. Additionally, Eldridge emphasizes that a significant portion of sadomasochistic practices occur among consenting adults and typically involves the prior arrangement of

mutually agreed-upon activities. This understanding contrasts with earlier definitions and associations discussed earlier in this section, which often encompassed notions of sexist violence, cruelty, sexual deviance and perversion. Notably, the term *perversion* continues to appear in contemporary definitions of masochism (Real Academia Española, n.d.).

Lastly, the American Psychiatric Association took a step towards the demedicalization of sadomasochism in response to the political and social actions emerged due to the stigmatization and pathologization of BDSM groups (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2005, quoted in Bezreh, Weinberg & Edgar, 2012, p. 39). These groups had highlighted the lack of evidence supporting the pathologization of sadism and masochism. Practitioners, researchers, and activists within the BDSM community had defended and fought during the sexual revolution, emphasizing the absence of evidence for the medicalization of S/M. Additionally, as mentioned before, the APA's decision may have been influenced by the fact that the DSM is heavily conditioned by prevailing social trends. As a result, the APA decided to demedicalize S/M and include the details of consent and distress in their current editions. After all, sadomasochism and BDSM are just erotic, consensual and recreational (Weinberg, 1987, p. 67).

4. Conclusion

BDSM transcends the realm of a simple misunderstood or sensationalized notion, it actually represents a versatile and profoundly personal practice grounded in the principles of communication, consent, and trust. This paper has focused on the exploration of its historical context, linguistic nuances, the influence of societal perceptions throughout the years and how these have influenced the understanding of different terms by the broader society. The analysis of important terms such as *pain*, *safeword*, *bondage*, *SAM*, *dual* and *sadomasochism* has portrayed a clear background on their significance within BDSM

community and linguistics, not only in its application but also in the cultural implication it embodies.

Historically, the origins of BDSM can be traced back to ancient rituals, artistic representations, and post-war leather subcultures, all of which have contributed to the formation of the contemporary, vibrant community. The development of BDSM terminology exemplifies the resilience of practitioners who have advocated for the recognition of their practices as legitimate and non-pathological. What is more, the emergence of feminist organizations like Samois and the adoption of principles such as “safe, sane and consensual” serve as a confirmation to the importance of dissident sexualities in establishing their own jargon and environments.

Besides, a decisive achievement for the BDSM community has been the demedicalization of its practices, eliminating the term *disease* of the map and differentiating a disorder, which causes distress and physical impairment, from a sexual and social preference, which is recreational. For many years, terms such as *sadomasochism* were burdened with psychiatric connotations, framing consensual and empowering experiences as pathological. Through relentless advocacy and increasing awareness, contemporary definitions now prioritize consent, mutual pleasure, and ethical engagement. Although there is a long path to run yet, this transformation transcends semantics and pragmatics, it represents a cultural evolution that has facilitated enhanced acceptance and comprehension.

Of course, feminist BDSM organizations have played a crucial role in this transformation. Publications like *Coming to Power* (Samois, 1981) have empowered women, particularly those who identify as lesbian or queer, to reclaim their sexuality and establish environments where they can safely and consensually explore power dynamics. The inclusive terminology and focus on mutual respect found in these works have not

only influenced BDSM but have also contributed to broader discussions regarding feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and sexual autonomy. What is more, through the establishment of safety protocols and the evolution of inclusive language, the BDSM community has demonstrated that respect and communication are essential components of any relationship, regardless of its nature.

Ultimately, as we think about the future, numerous avenues remain to be explored. How do factors such as ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic status intersect with BDSM practices? Are there limits within the inclusivity of these communities? The complexity of this field is highlighted in these questions, as they underscore the need for ongoing research and debate. For instance, the narrative of BDSM reflects a path of transformation, not only for kinksters but also for the broader societies in which they reside. Through a strong emphasis on the principles of consent and communication, the author hopes to have broadened the reader's knowledge about BDSM culture.

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