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POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF BDSM PRACTICES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC WORK: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

Miha MELAVC, Vesna JUG, Simona GOMBOC
University of Primorska, Koper, Slovenia

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In the context of the frequent stigmatisation of BDSM practices, the aim of this review was to identify potential positive effects of BDSM practices on the psychological functioning of individuals. Additionally, the factors and mechanisms underlying these positive effects will be highlighted to guide improvements in psychological and psychotherapeutic practices. After a systematic review of 181 articles, 9 studies were identified that examined the positive effects of BDSM practices. It was found that these practices positively impact self-awareness, authenticity, and a departure from adult responsibilities. Additionally, they can improve partner relationships by enhancing communication skills, negotiation abilities, and trust. Positive effects are contributed by BDSM practices through physical touch, open communication, and the formation of a community that provides safety and well-being for its members. Furthermore, research reports the possibility of transcendental states of consciousness among participants, which bring positive effects on psychological, emotional, and physical levels.

Keywords: BDSM, kink, positive psychological effects, psychotherapeutic practices



Vesna Jug, University of Primorska,
Titov trg 4, SI-6000 Koper, Slovenia.
E-mail: vesna.jug@upr.si

INTRODUCTION

Kink (i.e., sexual practices and behaviours that fall outside the boundaries of what is socially designated as "normal" sexual practice) and fetishes (sexual practices and behaviours that are outside the bounds of "normal" sexuality and are necessary for achieving sexual arousal, pleasure, or even orgasm) are quite prevalent in contemporary times. This prevalence is evidenced by the website FetLife, a social network focused on the BDSM, fetish, and kink communities, which currently boasts nearly 11 million members (The Social Network for the BDSM, Fetish & Kinky Community & FetLife, n.d.).

Among the most widespread kinks is BDSM. This overlapping acronym encompasses the terms "bondage and discipline", "dominance and submission", and "sadism and masochism". Bondage is a kink involving the physical restraint of partners, such as tying with ropes, chains, handcuffs, etc. Dominance and submission refer to power roles: the dominant is the one who takes control, leads the scene, and often assumes a more active/aggressive role, while the submissive is the one who relinquishes control. It is important to note that the submissive actually holds significant control as they can always end the scene prematurely, which is crucial since they are often in a more vulnerable position. Sadism and masochism are kinks that focus on physical or emotional pain (the sadist derives pleasure from inflicting pain, while the masochist derives pleasure from being subjected to pain; Koshevec, personal communication, June 2, 2023).

Participation in activities encompassed by this umbrella term was historically labelled as pathological and heavily stigmatised. This stigma emerged in the field of science during the Victorian era. Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1886; as cited in Turley, 2022), who is credited with coining the term "sodomasochism", classified such behaviours as abnormal.

For some individuals, BDSM may merely be a recreational activity, while for others, it may hold a more significant role in their lives (Barker et al., 2007), thus becoming a topic within the psychotherapeutic process. Cascalheira et al. (2021) and Lantto & Lundberg (2021) emphasise that psychotherapists must be prepared for this, as their own prejudices can negatively impact therapy outcomes. Conversely, therapists who understand the importance of such sexuality in their clients' lives (known as kink-aware therapists) can assist clients in exploring BDSM activities (Cascalheira et al., 2021; Domingue, 2019; Kleinplatz, 2006; Levand et al., 2019; Pillai-Friedman et al., 2014).

While BDSM practices can be risky due to the significant level of trust they require, which, in the wrong hands, can lead to re-traumatisation (Fernandez et al., 2015; Maltz & Boss, 2001; Van der Kolk, 1989), some researchers have already

pointed out the potential positive effects of BDSM practices, and many also highlight similarities between BDSM practices and psychotherapy. Levand et al. (2019) draw parallels between shadowplay (e.g., BDSM activities where individuals explore their darkest aspects, such as rape fantasies) and clinical/psychotherapeutic approaches for working with sexual trauma survivors. Shadowplay is associated with "strengths-based approaches" in therapy and has been likened to the therapeutic technique of "flooding" (Herman, 1992). It has been compared to the bottom-up approach to trauma processing, which allows the body to experience situations that counter feelings of helplessness, anger, and emotional collapse resulting from trauma (Van der Kolk, 2014). Through this process, participants can regain control over their bodies and sexual lives by engaging in "healthy risks" – activities that push them out of their comfort zones while remaining within their coping capacity (Haines, 2007). Crafting a shadowplay narrative involves identifying trauma triggers and incorporating them into an erotic scenario, offering an active way to cope with trauma. This method may be more effective than avoiding triggers, as many trauma survivors tend to do (Haines, 2007).

Stigma surrounding sexuality and "abnormal sexual practices" persists in various forms today, and as a result, this area remains relatively under-researched in science (Baker, 2016; Rogak & Connor, 2017). However, an increasing number of studies indicate positive, not merely sexual, effects of BDSM practices (Casalheira et al., 2021; Thomas, 2019; Turley, 2022).

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature on BDSM practices to identify potential positive effects on individuals' psychological functioning. Additionally, factors and mechanisms underlying these positive effects will be highlighted to inform improvements in psychological and psychotherapeutic practice.

METHODS

To ensure methodological rigour in the systematic review, we adhered to the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The search protocol was designed to address our research question: identifying the positive effects of BDSM practices on individuals' psychological functioning, along with the underlying factors and mechanisms. This approach focused solely on positive effects, excluding studies that reported negative outcomes.

The literature search was conducted on December 19, 2022, across four databases: Web of Science, PubMed, Scopus, and APA PsycArticles. The following keywords were used for the search: "BDSM therapy", "BDSM as therapy", "BDSM as a form of therapy", "therapeutic effects of BDSM", and "non-erotic outcomes of BDSM". Due to the small number of hits in all data-

bases, the time frame did not play a role in the inclusion and exclusion of studies.

The inclusion criteria for the literature search were primarily based on thematic relevance, specifically focusing on the positive or therapeutic effects of BDSM practices. Additionally, only studies with full-text availability and publications in English or Slovenian were included. Studies dealing with sexual orientation in general, issues faced in therapy by individuals participating in BDSM activities, and those published in other languages were excluded.

After duplicates were removed, studies were first evaluated based on the title and abstract, and in the next step, based on the full text. Studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded. One author retrieved articles from the databases, while two authors assessed the suitability of individual articles for inclusion. Data from studies that met the inclusion criteria were collected by one author. The data collected included: authors' names and publication year, research design, sample and control group details, findings, and methodological limitations.

The quality of the studies was assessed using two marking checklists: the Newcastle Ottawa cohort scale for cross-sectional studies [NOS] (Herzog et al., 2013) for quantitative studies, and the Quality assessment for the systematic review of qualitative evidence [QASR] (Hawker et al., 2002). The NOS is an evaluation scale that assigns points to studies in three areas: selection, comparability, and outcome, with a maximum possible score of 10 points. The QASR is a scale with 9 questions, each awarded 1-4 points. The quality of the studies is assessed based on the final number of points on the scale: high quality (A), 30-36 points; medium quality (B), 29-24 points; low quality (C), 9-24 points. To ensure more accurate evaluations, the quality of the studies was independently reviewed and assessed by two authors.

RESULTS

A total of 181 articles were retrieved from the databases, and after removing duplicates, 59 remained. Following exclusions based on titles and abstracts, and subsequently full-text reviews, we excluded 7 non-scientific papers, 11 studies that focused on sexual orientation or identity in general, 14 studies that addressed negative issues in therapy for individuals involved in BDSM, and 18 studies that did not focus on BDSM or its psychological effects (e.g., studies on kink, intimate partner violence, reproductive success, etc.). The remaining 9 articles were retained for inclusion.

The initial process of article identification and selection is illustrated in Figure 1.

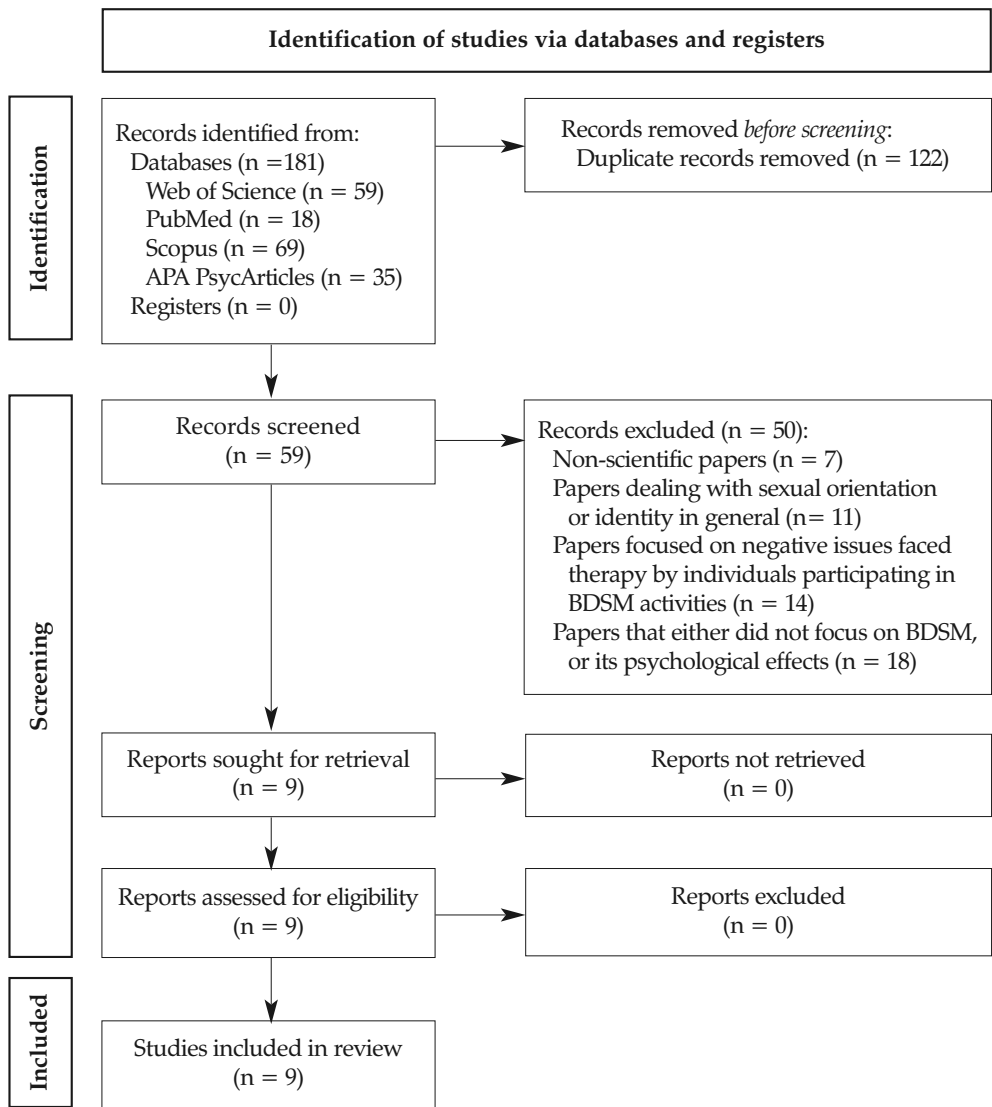


FIGURE 1 PRISMA flow chart of article identification and selection

The included studies are presented in Table 1. They were published between 2006 and 2022. Among the 9 studies, one is an autoethnography, one is a quantitative study, two are case studies, and five are qualitative studies (three with a phenomenological approach and one with a descriptive phenomenological approach). Several studies focus on BDSM as a whole, while some focus only on certain branches of BDSM practices (e.g., traumaplay, puppyplay, etc.).

The evaluation of the studies is also presented in Table 1. The quantitative study was awarded 9/10 points based on the NOS. Six of the eight qualitative studies were rated as high quality, and two were rated as medium quality.

➔ TABLE 1
Summary of included
studies

Study	Research design	Sample	Findings	Limitations	Evaluation
Lindemann (2011)	Qualitative research	66 professional dominatrices from the New York and San Francisco Bay areas	Professional dominatrices often view themselves as therapists and their work as a form of psychological healing for their clients. Sexual repression is a common issue today, which dominatrices help resolve, enabling clients to reclaim power over their trauma, experience transformational moments, atonement through shame, self-discovery, and authenticity.	The study focuses solely on professional dominatrices, thus professional BDSM practices, which may lead to difficulties in generalising to the entire population of BDSM participants.	30 (A)
Kleinplatz (2006)	Case study	2 couples engaged in BDSM practices and attending sexual therapy	Although "non-traditional sexual practices" are often labelled as pathological, there is much to learn from them. Partners who engage in such practices exhibit better communication skills, negotiation abilities, deeper knowledge of each other, and often achieve a higher level of intimacy. Such practices lead to increased satisfaction, trust, and can result in more than just orgasm.	A small sample size, and the study primarily addresses the sadomasochistic perspective of BDSM practices	25 (B)
Thomas (2019)	Autoethnography	Author	Trauma play is not merely re-enacting trauma but involves rewriting the script and reclaiming power over trauma, one's own body, and life.	This is an autoethnographic study, where the sample consists solely of the author, which can be both beneficial and limiting. It provides firsthand data but these may be subjective and not representative. The study also focuses more on trauma play, which is just one part of BDSM practices.	31 (A)

(Continues)

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Study	Research design	Sample	Findings	Limitations	Evaluation
Rogak & Connor (2017)	Quantitative research	163 individuals	Couples who practice BDSM report satisfaction in their relationships.	/	9/10
Baker (2016)	Descriptive phenomenological approach	3 individuals	The study touches on seven key themes: challenge; surrender; visionary experience; bodily sense of energy forces; sense of spiritual presence; heightened consciousness; and profound personal and enduring transformation.	A relatively small sample.	36 (A)
Langdrige & Lawson (2019)	Phenomenological approach	68 individuals	Puppies in puppy play can temporarily shed the responsibilities of adulthood and live in the moment akin to child's play. Through their personas, they explore parts of themselves, becoming more authentic, and may integrate some aspects of their personas into the 'real world.'	The study deals exclusively with puppy play, which is just a part of BDSM practices.	36 (A)
Cascalheira et al. (2021)	Qualitative research	20 individuals	Victims of early abuse and trauma can change their own perception of abuse through BDSM, becoming more confident and authentic, gaining more positive sexual schemas, improved self-awareness, etc. Through relationships in BDSM practices, they can gain power, competence in relationships, improve boundary-setting, etc., with the role of therapists being crucial.	/	36 (A)
Domingue (2019)	Case study	1 individual	BDSM allows for controlled exploration of personal limits and can change one's perception of their own trauma. This can lead to empowerment and better self-acceptance. Dominants can take on the role of therapist.	/	28 (B)
Turley (2022)	Phenomenological approach	11 individuals	BDSM has numerous non-sexual and non-erotic effects, which are less commonly represented in science. BDSM enables access to states of heightened consciousness, escapism from reality, and can lead to self-discovery and improved self-esteem.	/	32 (A)

Upon reviewing the literature, several themes were identified in the studies, which can be categorised into six overarching topics: therapeutic effects of BDSM practices on individuals, therapeutic effects on romantic relationships, factors of positive changes, the role of the BDSM community, BDSM and therapy, and spirituality.

Therapeutic effects of BDSM practices on individuals

Through the literature review, several positive effects of BDSM practices on individuals have been observed. One such effect is self-exploration and learning. Domingue (2019) writes about client Peter and his discovery of BDSM practices. In one example provided, Peter recounts an experience where he was bound and then had a *hood* (referred to as such in the BDSM world) placed over his entire head, noticing an immediate shift in focus. He realised that the hood took on the role of a "public face" for him, enabling him to more easily explore what was happening "beneath the surface", his own emotions, feelings, and thoughts. Turley (2022) emphasises that the journey of self-discovery in BDSM practices is not uniform for everyone but depends on the subjective experiences of each individual, as well as their role.

Self-discovery is important as it can lead to authenticity (Kleinplatz, 2006; Langdridge & Lawson, 2019; Lindemann, 2011). Often, parts of ourselves are closed off and hidden from others due to fear of consequences, which can require tremendous energy. Kleinplatz (2006) reports significant improvements in both sexual and other areas of life after clients allowed themselves to be authentic and stopped hiding parts of themselves from partners. Kleinplatz (2006) also notes people's fear once they acknowledge their desires or even try them, fearing they won't be able to resist them anymore. However, the reality is often the opposite. Hiding and isolation often only fuel fantasies, while disclosure, on the other hand, brings relief.

Langdridge & Lawson (2019), who explore the psychology of *puppyplay* (a BDSM activity where a person pretends to be a puppy or caretaker; Koshevec, personal communication, June 2, 2023), discuss how pretending to be puppies can allow people to temporarily relinquish the responsibilities of adulthood and instead embrace a playful exuberance, free from societal expectations of how adults should behave. They highlight the response received from one of the interviewees, emphasising that puppyplay serves solely as an escape from daily tasks, which can be very stressful. On the other hand, within puppyplay, there is the role of the handler, whose responsibility is to care for the puppy. This role does not offer an escape from responsibility but rather provides dominance, ownership, and care for the more vulnerable, playful, and typically

less responsible other (thus more of a support role). This too can have positive effects on the individual, as shown by the case of another interviewee, Benny, who explains that while his initial involvement in puppyplay revolved around sado-masochism, it evolved into an ability to help others, which brings him great satisfaction. BDSM is not just an escape from everyday life for individuals who engage in roles of puppies but also for participants in other branches of BDSM practices (Turley, 2022).

Several interviewees in the study by Langdridge & Lawson (2019) also discuss the positive effects of BDSM practices outside of sessions. They particularly report on how the persona of a puppy also benefits their "human persona". Initially distinct, these personas can begin to influence each other over time. For instance, Samson, one of the interviewees, noticed certain traits in his puppy persona that he liked, allowing him to incorporate them into his human persona as well. Consequently, he became "more confident and allowed himself to be bolder" outside of sessions (Langdridge & Lawson, 2019, p. 2210).

Therefore, BDSM may not only facilitate self-discovery but can also be transformative and lead to changes in one's personality, as reported by Lindemann (2011). These changes are often positive, as they require us to be honest with ourselves. Thus, they demand authenticity. This can lead to improved self-esteem, self-confidence, and a sense of self-worth, allowing participants to see themselves in a new light, as reported by Cascalheira et al. (2021).

Therapeutic effects on romantic relationships

Cascalheira et al. (2021) emphasise that BDSM practices have therapeutic potentials by enabling participants to assume roles necessary for recovery. Therefore, it is not incorrect to consider that BDSM can also have positive effects on relationships, as confirmed by Cascalheira et al. (2021). They propose the idea of a "nurturing BDSM dyad" that helps participants develop competencies crucial for relationships, such as enhancing communication skills through better articulation of needs and desires, and overall improved communication. Domingue (2019) and Kleinplatz (2006) agree, emphasising that improved negotiation skills can also contribute to better communication. Developing these skills may also enhance an individual's ability to set personal boundaries. Additionally, Cascalheira et al. (2021) underscore the importance of *safewords*, specific words or phrases chosen by participants themselves, which partners respect, unlike abusers. Safewords are particularly crucial, as words such as "no" or "stop" could be used as part of a scene and therefore could have dubious meaning

which goes against the "Safe Sane and Consensual" rule of BDSM.

With improved communication, not only ourselves but also our partner may be better understood. Kleinplatz (2006) reports that people often describe a sense of synchrony between partners, which she explains as a mutual sense of "attunement" resulting in a strong mutual bond. For such partners, Kleinplatz (2006) reports that they know each other so intimately that they can almost predict each other's responses. The combination of anticipation, unpredictability, and empathy arising from this is said to strengthen and enhance the bond between partners. Considering all these effects, it is not surprising that Rogak & Connor (2017) found that people who engage in BDSM activities are often satisfied in their relationships.

Factors of positive changes

Lindemann (2011) conducted interviews with 66 professional *dominatrices*, women who professionally engage in dominating clients for payment (Koshevec, personal communication, June 2, 2023). She described various aspects of dominatrices' work, which they claim has therapeutic effects. In the interviews, dominatrices reported that many clients seek them out for intimate (not just erotic) physical contact. Lindemann (2011) speculates that the demand for such services is increasing due to growing technologisation and physical detachment in modern society.

Another aspect of BDSM practices believed to have positive effects is conversation. Interviewees in Lindemann's study (2011) spoke about how sometimes simply talking with clients is as important as actual physical touch. One dominatrix shared that clients often discuss their problems during sessions, which they cannot talk about with their partners at home, such as their interests and fantasies. This can lead to sexual repression, identified by interviewees as a cause of many clients' psychological issues. Dominatrices highlighted the negative consequences of hiding "parts of themselves" due to social unacceptability. Releasing these inhibitions and embracing BDSM practices can have therapeutic effects. Lindemann (2011) also argues that the concept of a *dungeon* (a space specialised for BDSM activities; Koshevec, personal communication, June 2, 2023) as a confessional (where the act of speaking alone is psychologically beneficial) correlates with other professions. Specifically, she mentions the profession of a bartender, who not only serves alcohol but also provides a "sympathetic ear".

Next is the aspect of *play*. Paasonen (2017) states that the concept of play has long been associated with BDSM practice. Stear (2009) compares role-playing in BDSM to childhood

imaginative play, where a person uses props, stories, and experiences "quasi-emotions" (belief and physiological response to stimulus without acting: for example, feeling genuine fear during a horror movie but not fleeing the theatre). Thomas (2019) further expands on this, stating that there is a common assumption in the literature that play has something inherently healing. He specifically focuses on what is known as *traumaplay*. Here, trauma becomes the object of play (Koshevec, personal communication, June 2, 2023), allowing a person to gain some power over it. Traumaplay thus connects with "play therapy". This is particularly suitable for BDSM participants who struggle with verbal expression and with processing their traumas and abuses, as play enables individuals to enact emotions, thoughts, and experiences they may not otherwise articulate well enough with words (Bratton et al., 2005).

Several researchers hypothesise that one of the mechanisms through which BDSM practices have therapeutic effects is the concept of "rescripting". Thomas (2019) suggests that in traumaplay (where BDSM practices focus on the participant's trauma and their awareness of it), rescripting involves changing the scenario or revisiting traumatic experiences, potentially leading to retraumatisation. Weille (2002) argues that through repeated exposure to trauma, there is an opportunity for the scenario to change through a process of oscillating between repetition and "repair". Cascalheira et al. (2021) argue that people participating in BDSM or kink practices can often change their perception of early trauma or abuse. Hammers (2019) emphasises that the key role of fantasy lies in changing the scenario and consequently reforming trauma through BDSM, making it easier for individuals to cope. Additionally, Turley (2022) highlights that BDSM practices can facilitate this transformation through intense physical, psychological, and emotional states and feelings, potentially providing participants with a phenomenological opportunity to perceive and recognise things in their consciousness in a new, alternative way compared to facing them for the first time.

Power dynamics involve not only childhood traumatic experiences of participants but also extend to using these activities to gain power over more systemic traumas such as racism, through involvement in *raceplay*. As evident from its name, raceplay involves the use of race or stereotypes in BDSM sessions (Koshevec, personal communication, June 2, 2023). Similar to childhood trauma, here individuals voluntarily gain control over systemic oppression. Interviewees in Lindemann's study (2011) discuss Black men who, through raceplay, establish scenes of slavery with White dominatrices. Participants often mentioned that Black men prefer to assume a dominant role with Black women in raceplay sessions. Lindemann (2011)

argues that raceplay can be therapeutic in two ways, both operating on the same principle – through voluntary reproduction of racial hierarchies under their own terms or by dismantling hierarchies (also under their own terms). Therefore, BDSM practices can have therapeutic effects not only for the submissive in the session but also for the dominant, as discussed by Cascalheira et al. (2021), citing the example of JB, who, through a dominant role in BDSM practice, ceased to view herself as a victim even outside of sessions.

In BDSM practice, trust between partners is crucial. Kleinplatz (2006) emphasises that the level of trust required in BDSM activities is very high compared to "ordinary" sexuality (e.g., vaginal penetration with a penis), such as in bondage. Trust must be mutual. It is often taken for granted that the submissive person must trust the dominant to be respectful, responsive to any changes in the submissive, and ensure a positive experience for all present. Conversely, it is equally important that the dominant person trusts that the submissive has sufficient self-knowledge and awareness of the risks and benefits of the activities they wish to engage in to fully give consent.

In terms of trust, it is essential for participants in BDSM sessions to recognise that it involves a "controlled scenario". BDSM is often depicted as the giving or taking of complete power over a person; however, it is crucial to note that these are agreements that have been pre-negotiated. Through BDSM, participants can transform feelings and emotions that would otherwise be uncomfortable into something positive. Thus, BDSM may allow individuals to access their physical and mental limits in a controlled manner. Bauer (2014) hypothesises that through BDSM practice, individuals can confront the "dark" aspects of their past by creating a similar but controlled scenario. Therefore, BDSM activities such as *rapeplay* (BDSM activities centred around the fantasy of rape) may operate cathartically because, unlike actual rape experiences, the submissive person has actual control over the outcome of the experience (which is planned in advance). Moreover, the experience can be terminated early using a safeword.

Kleinplatz (2006) states that by establishing a safeword, partners affirm their awareness that the intensity of the session may lead to conscious or unconscious ambivalent responses. Safewords allow participants to maintain immersion in the scene, thus enabling them to approach their own boundaries more effectively. BDSM activities can be associated with the psychological concept of "gradual exposure". Cascalheira et al. (2021) note that some participants in their study gradually approached distressing stimuli through kink, which previously triggered intense reactions. They also mention that certain kinks were initially challenging for some participants,

but through BDSM, they reprocessed behavioural or contextual stimuli to the point where they no longer triggered memories of abuse. They hypothesise that kink "disrupts" conditioned responses to environmental stimuli that were previously perceived as threats. Therefore, kink does not retraumatise (i.e., repeat traumatic experiences), but allows for the restructuring of elements of traumatic events.

Part of the BDSM practices involves various BDSM parties, which include exhibitionism. Domingue (2019) and Thomas (2019) emphasise the importance of considering the role of spectators in public and semi-public sessions. Hart (1998) suggests that having people witness one's trauma or abuse can be therapeutic compared to hiding and suppressing such events. Public performance and script-changing can thus provide a context for validation and recognition.

Another aspect of BDSM practice believed to have positive effects is *aftercare*. Lindemann (2011) provides an example of a dominatrix who discussed aftercare following "humiliation/degradation scenes" in an interview. The interviewee talks about how after such sessions, she tells clients involved in humiliation scenes to return to themselves, no longer seeing themselves as dogs or pigs, etc. Lindemann (2011) suggests that the process of humiliation and shame validates what the client is not. Thus, the client can find "redemption" in realising that this role was only "ephemeral".

Turley (2022) suggests that BDSM participants can experience transformative moments through intense physical, psychological, and emotional states. These moments may offer phenomenological opportunities for participants to acknowledge and recognise things occurring in their consciousness in alternative ways, beyond their initial recognition. Kleinplatz (2006) emphasises how many individuals seek to conceal themselves during sexual encounters, while "unusual lovers" deliberately seek out things that evoke anxious feelings. Mahrer (1996) theorises that things that create feelings of embarrassment, nervous laughter, curiosity, risk, and simultaneous excitement have the potential for personal growth. BDSM participants thus do not try to mitigate, change, or ignore such anxious feelings but can use them for personal development and erotic intimacy.

Thomas (2019) warns that certain elements of BDSM practice, such as the pervasive dynamics of power exchange, are significant for many people. Bauer (2014) particularly highlights relationship characteristics like trust, intimacy, and vulnerability. He also mentions that some conditions for achieving therapeutic effects depend on the individual and can vary greatly. Thomas (2019) points out physical pain as crucial for him, whereas for many others, it may not be necessary.

The role of the BDSM community

BDSM practice is thus very widespread today, and an entire community has developed around it. This community plays an important role. One of the main tasks of the community is to inform and educate new members about norms, thereby keeping the community safe for all participants. This is why the community is often referred to as a safe space. Cascalheira et al. (2021) report on cultural safety and recovery because of the awareness of the seriousness of sexual abuse. They also describe the culture as a community that accepts various body types, fostering a sense of belonging and caring for its members even outside the BDSM scene. One participant in the study, who was dealing with drug addiction, even described the BDSM community as an unofficial twelve-step programme, where mentors were equated with sponsors and learning techniques with the steps.

The authors also report on "witness healing". Similar to how Domingue (2019) and Thomas (2019) emphasise exhibitionism during scenes, Cascalheira et al. (2021) highlight the importance of the community, as it is difficult to find someone within it who has never faced trauma. Hearing others' testimonies about their traumatic experiences can encourage the process of dealing with one's own (Cascalheira et al., 2021).

BDSM and therapy

As reported in the introduction, there are several parallels that can be drawn between BDSM practice and psychotherapy. Thomas (2019), for example, states that experiences in BDSM practice rarely remain static and evolve over time, involving different kinks and fetishes that come into and out of focus. Similarly, in therapeutic practices, a single issue is seldom the sole focus.

Kleinplatz (2006) points out another similarity between BDSM practice and therapy. As an example, she describes a patient who enters the office of a clinical psychologist or psychiatrist and discloses intense and long-standing fantasies of being tied up and beaten, which make him feel distressed. With this information, the professional has enough to potentially diagnose him with a paraphilia (sexual masochism) according to the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). However, in both psychotherapy and BDSM practice, more important than the diagnosis itself is engaging in dialogue with the person to discover exactly what they are seeking. The author highlights that in the field of clinical mental health, there is often too much focus on labels and not enough on the uniqueness of the individual. Diagnostic labels can thus hinder the exploration of the individual's uniqueness before us.

These two concepts also differ significantly from each other. Due to some of these differences, BDSM can in some cases more easily address certain obstacles that psychotherapy faces. Above, it was reported on play that allows for nonverbal expression of thoughts and emotions, something clients in therapy (which is primarily verbal) may struggle with. Our bodies have their own stories and memories that may not always align with our thoughts and feelings (Spencer 2015; Young 1996). Through BDSM, this embodiment of trauma can possibly be "tapped into" by listening to our bodies, not just our minds (Thomas 2019).

It is crucial to emphasise that while the therapeutic effects of BDSM practices in this context have been reported on, this does not mean that BDSM can replace therapy. Lindemann (2011) cautions that BDSM participants are rarely sufficiently educated in psychology and psychotherapy. Thomas (2019) describes a session where he felt even more traumatised for several days afterwards, including a 24-hour period experiencing dissociative episodes. Therefore, in BDSM practice, especially in activities dealing with darker themes (shadowplay, traumaplay, etc.), there is always a risk. This risk can be mitigated with the help of a professional, thus maximising the benefits of such activities, as Carol and Dana did, as described by Kleinplatz (2006). It is essential, however, that the therapist is open to such experiences, as otherwise, it could have adverse consequences (Casalheira et al., 2021).

Spirituality

Baker (2016) and Turley (2022) emphasise the possible occurrence of transcendent states of consciousness in BDSM activities. Turley (2022) describes these states as deeply relaxing and "pure", also noting feelings of calmness and tranquility. These states are described as achieving new psychological, emotional, and physical levels, offering participants feelings of peace and well-being that often persist beyond the session. Transcendent states of consciousness are said to differ based on the role in the scene (dominant and submissive), but similarities exist.

Several studies (Baker, 2016; Thomas, 2019; Turley, 2022) report on the concept of *subspace* (typically described as hypnotic and hazy) and *domspace* (typically described as intense and euphoric). Thomas (2019) has drawn parallels between the idea of subspace and the clinical concept of dissociation, noting several dissociative elements in his own experience but overall describing it as a positive one. Elements akin to mindfulness concepts, such as self-focus, bodily awareness, and being in the present moment, are frequently mentioned in this context (Domingue, 2019; Langdridge & Lawson, 2019; Thomas, 2019).

DISCUSSION

The stigma surrounding sexuality and "abnormal sexual practices" persists even in scientific discourse today, despite an increasing number of studies highlighting various positive effects of BDSM activities that extend beyond their purely sexual nature. Similarly, the societal pressure faced by BDSM practitioners can be compared to the minority stress described by Ferbežar et al. (2024), who emphasise the psychological toll of societal rejection and its impact on well-being. The purpose of this review article was to survey the literature on BDSM practices to identify potential positive effects and gain a better understanding of the factors and mechanisms behind these effects, thereby informing improvements in psychological and psychotherapeutic practices. In the following section, the findings are first summarised, followed by a discussion of the limitations of the research and this research area in general.

In BDSM practice, individuals often engage in self-exploration and self-discovery. This process varies for each individual and can be facilitated by various tools (such as a hood that, when worn over the face, represents a "public persona", enabling easier exploration of one's emotions, feelings, and thoughts). Deepening self-understanding can also lead to authenticity. Several authors have found that releasing hidden aspects of oneself and consequently achieving higher authenticity significantly may improve not only sexual life but also other areas of life. Simultaneously, BDSM play can allow participants to temporarily relinquish the responsibilities of adult life and societal expectations. These effects can often extend beyond the sessions themselves, indicating the transformative nature of BDSM practice, which can lead to greater self-respect, a more positive self-image, increased willingness to take risks, and other benefits.

Individuals practising BDSM must feel sufficiently safe within the relationship, which can positively impact their partnership. Researchers have found that a nurturing BDSM dyad can help develop competencies essential for relationships, such as better communication (enhanced ability to articulate one's needs and desires, improved negotiation skills, etc.), and easier establishment of personal boundaries. This can then lead to a better understanding of one's partner, which can result in "synchrony" or a mutual sense of "attunement" between partners. Consequently, a strong mutual bond may be formed.

BDSM can be beneficial as it involves physical touch, which is presumably increasingly lacking in modern society. In addition to physical touch, BDSM can offer participants the opportunity to establish a trusting and safe environment, which can facilitate honest communication, potentially helping them

to be authentic and open with others, as well as with themselves. This can lead to the resolution of tensions caused by hiding parts of oneself. BDSM often includes elements of role-playing, comparable to children's play, which is also the basis of play therapy. The literature frequently discusses the potential of trauma resolution through the use of BDSM (especially in the context of "trauma play"). Participants, by consciously relinquishing control to another person, can gain power, thereby possibly altering the narrative and perception of their trauma. This process addresses not only individual trauma but can also address systemic trauma (such as racism). The trust required in BDSM activities can allow participants to explore the "darker" aspects of their personality or past in a controlled and gradual manner, akin to the technique of "gradual exposure".

BDSM may also provide therapeutic effects through exhibitionism, where having witnesses to one's suffering and trauma can be therapeutic, contrasting with hiding one's suffering from others. Humiliation and verbal degradation can be therapeutic, especially with the use of "aftercare" (actions taken by partners to check in with each other, support each other, and conclude the BDSM session; Koshevec, personal communication, June 2, 2023), where the dominant partner reassures the submissive that the scene is over and does not view them in that way, affirming that the role is temporary and not reflective of "real life".

BDSM is already so widespread that an entire community has developed around it. This community plays an important role, one of its main functions being to alert and educate new members about norms and safeguards, thereby maintaining safety for all participants. This is why the community is often regarded as a safe space. The community welcomes all individuals who wish to join, regardless of their sexual orientation, body shape, etc. Additionally, many people within the community are dealing with their own trauma. Their stories can also serve as motivation for others to begin their own recovery.

In addition to the previously mentioned similarities between BDSM practice and therapy, it was also discovered that BDSM activities, like psychotherapy, are rarely static but evolve over time. Both are similar in that, unlike psychiatry or clinical psychology where diagnosis is often the end goal, BDSM practice and psychotherapy emphasise in-depth conversations and the forces behind various issues. However, BDSM and psychotherapy are not entirely the same. BDSM differs from psychotherapy in several aspects, with some even preferring it over psychotherapy. For example, BDSM practice in the form

of play allows for non-verbal expression of thoughts and emotions, which can be a limitation in primarily (but not exclusively) verbal psychotherapy.

Several studies have reported that participants experience transcendent states of consciousness during BDSM practices. These states are often described as deeply relaxing and pure, simultaneously offering new psychological, emotional, and physical levels. Participants may feel a sense of peace and well-being, along with an experience similar to mindfulness, characterised by a focus on oneself, one's body, and the present moment. However, unlike mindfulness, which is well-researched and has clear therapeutic protocols (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 2003), BDSM headspaces have not been sufficiently researched to determine with certainty whether they lead to the same therapeutic effects (Holvoet et al., 2017).

The limitations of this research are as follows: The most obvious limitation is the small number of papers eligible for the PRISMA method. The topic is still in its early stages of research; however, it is possible that more papers could have been found if additional databases had been searched. A second limitation is that the identified articles primarily focused on the positive effects of BDSM activities, with significantly less emphasis on their negative impacts. This focus could create a perception of bias in the attempt to destigmatise BDSM activities and sexuality within scientific discourse.

Despite the possible positive effects discussed in this paper, it is important to acknowledge that BDSM practices can be risky activities that may lead to negative consequences for individuals if not used properly. In addition to the issues already reported in the Results section, which were raised by the authors of the papers included in this review, several important findings further emphasise the necessity of awareness regarding the risks involved in BDSM practices. For instance, a systematic review by Fernandez et al. (2015) revealed that flooding, a technique involving intense exposure to traumatic memories, can result in heightened PTSD, anxiety, and depression when not applied correctly. Similarly, Brown et al. (2020) caution that engaging in trauma work without the support of a trained professional, especially in intense contexts such as BDSM, may exacerbate trauma symptoms rather than alleviate them. Barker (2013) notes that while BDSM communities often prioritise safety and consent, this does not automatically guarantee therapeutic outcomes for everyone.

In general, the topic is not well-explored, and there are relatively few studies. But since existing research shows promising results, it would be beneficial for further exploration to continue with more rigorous research. Longitudinal and

controlled studies are needed, as the current literature primarily relies on self-reported data, which is susceptible to bias (Wismeijer & van Assen, 2013).

Before concluding this paper, it is essential to reiterate that the purpose of this work is not to present BDSM practices as an alternative to psychotherapy or psychological counselling but to raise awareness of their potential therapeutic effects in a world where sexuality remains a taboo and is, in some contexts, even labelled as pathological. Although some authors (e.g., Cascalheira et al., 2021) suggest that a combination of traditional psychotherapy and BDSM practices has been found to be most effective, empirical evidence supporting this claim remains limited. Lastly, it is important to note that a therapist's disapproval of BDSM practices can negatively affect outcomes, while kink-aware therapists can enhance the benefits of BDSM by helping clients avoid pathologisation or stigmatisation (Pitagora, 2013).

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Pozitivni psihološki učinci BDSM praksi i njihove implikacije za psihološki i psihoterapijski rad: sustavni pregled literature

Miha MELAVC, Vesna JUG, Simona GOMBOC
Sveučilište Primorska, Koper, Slovenija

U kontekstu česte stigmatizacije BDSM praksi, cilj ovog pregleda bio je identificirati potencijalne pozitivne učinke BDSM praksi na psihološko funkcioniranje pojedinaca. Dodatno, čimbenici i mehanizmi koji stoje iza ovih pozitivnih učinaka bit će istaknuti kako bi se usmjerila poboljšanja u psihološkoj i psihoterapijskoj praksi. Nakon sustavnoga pregleda 181 članka, identificirano je 9 studija koje su istraživale pozitivne učinke BDSM praksi. Utvrđeno je da ove prakse pozitivno utječu na samosvijest, autentičnost i udaljšavanje od odgovornosti odraslih. Ujedno mogu poboljšati partnerske odnose jačanjem vještina komunikacije, sposobnosti pregovaranja i povjerenja. Pozitivni učinci BDSM praksi pridonose fizičkom dodiru, otvorenoj komunikaciji i formiranju zajednice koja pruža sigurnost i dobrobit svojim članovima. Nadalje, istraživanja izvještavaju o mogućnosti transcendentnih stanja svijesti među sudionicima, što donosi pozitivne učinke na psihološkoj, emocionalnoj i fizičkoj razini.

Ključne riječi: BDSM, kink, pozitivni psihološki učinci, psihoterapeutske prakse



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