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## **How do kinky people know what they know? The information behaviour of BDSM practitioners**

### **Introduction**

This paper describes the findings of an exploratory study into the information behaviour of BDSM practitioners. The term “BDSM” is a portmanteau of bondage/discipline, domination/submission, sadism/masochism. Based on four, in-depth interviews and using the principles of Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS), it explores how real and virtual communities have created grassroots social networks that have delimited and defined the subject area of BDSM and developed sophisticated information practices.

This research has been motivated by two key questions. As a participant in BDSM practice, I am aware of the vast number and variety of information resources on BDSM. There are manuals, guides, introductions, erotica, works on health (mental and physical) and safety; there are dating sites, formal and informal gatherings, play groups, leather families, mentorships, workshops and seminars; BDSM themes run through pop culture, literature, film and music. The first question relates to the use of these resources: who uses them, and how?

There are also numerous individuals worldwide who engage in a wide range of BDSM practices. The safe and enjoyable practice of BDSM implies that some kind of information behaviour has taken place. The second question relates to the practitioners themselves: how do they know what they know? This question may also be broken down into the following categories: "what do they know, and how do they know it?" (technical knowledge), "what do they do, and with whom do they do it?" (interpersonal and community relations) and "who are they, and who/what do these practices make them?" (identity).

As well as being a case study in information behaviour in a specific field, I endeavour to open the realm of BDSM for Library and Information Science (LIS) research. There appears to be no prior writing on information behaviour in BDSM, so my research is exploratory. Given the abundance and sophistication of information practices in this field, as well as the logistical constraints of a two-semester, independent research project, I have attempted to strike a balance between breadth and depth herein.

### *Justification*

This research shall contribute to the small body of LIS literature on sexuality and sex-related information behaviour. Sex and sexuality are enormously important factors in human life, society, art and politics; they are subject to considerable expenditures of time, money and energy. However, LIS research does not appear to reflect this interest.

This research is a case study of a specific kind of sex-related information behaviour. BDSM highlights the intersection of leisure and wellness in sex. Much information seeking is directed toward the aggressive pursuit of greater and more varied pleasures, which often correlate to greater risk and, therefore, a greater need for health and safety information. I do not believe that these aspects of information can be distinguished: there is a simultaneous move to maximizing pleasure while minimizing risk. Close analysis of specific information behaviours bears testament to this.

BDSM is also of interest to LIS because of the emphasis on grassroots, socially-constructed knowledge. BDSM is a marginalized and stigmatized body of knowledge, generally not considered orthodox, normative sexuality. As sociological research indicates, representations of BDSM in mainstream media are often skewed either towards pathology or seedy exposés, or use BDSM iconography to suggest transgression in advertisement (Weiss, 2006; Wilkinson, 2009); there are effectively no mainstream information sources for BDSM practitioners. Lacking such sources, practitioners of BDSM have had to develop sophisticated, grassroots information networks: real and virtual communities, a publishing industry, practices of private and semi-public personal instruction (workshops, mentorships, etc.). The worlds of BDSM have also developed their own unique information grounds, folklore, authorities, celebrities and practices of avoiding mainstream sanction. These features make BDSM practitioners a unique population worthy of study.

Exact figures on the prevalence of BDSM practice are unavailable. Brame and Brame cite the Kinsey Institute's estimate that "5 percent to 10 percent of the adult American population regularly engages in some form of [BDSM]" (Brame & Brame, 1996). An Australian study of 19,307 adults, aged 16-59, reports that "1.8% of sexually active people (2.2% of men, 1.3% of women) said they had been involved in BDSM in the previous year" (Richters, de Visser, Rissel, Grulich, & Smith, 2008).

### *Terminology*

I use the term "BDSM" with some reservations. There is no consensus definition, however, of what actually constitutes BDSM; a content analysis of the employment of terminology in discourse would be entirely appropriate, but is beyond the scope of this project.

In general, I am interested in a set of non-heteronormative, unproductive, non-mainstream sexual practices. What we call this set of practices may vary greatly; different terminology may be used by different people, in different times, and different places, in relation to different activities. Specific activities may also be named or conceptualized differently by different people. As Weinberg notes, "it is inaccurate to speak generically of the sadomasochistic subculture. There are many different sadomasochistic worlds organized around sexual orientation, gender, and preferred activities" (Weinberg, 2006)

According to the interviewees' usage – complemented by an informal analysis of discourse in information resources and in discussion forums – I propose the following, rough definitions of key terminology. Please note that these should not be taken as definitive delimitations of the concepts, but as a guide to the most common and widely understood usage of the terms.

The most generic term for the subject of this study is *kink*. Kink may be characterized as the catch-all umbrella term for unproductive, non-heteronormative sex (referred to as "vanilla"). Kink is not rigidly defined but is generally encompasses: bondage; sadomasochism; domination and submission; sexual fetishism; fetish fashion; playful, exploratory and experimental sex; role-play. The various acts encompassed by kink do not imply one another. While the interviewees distinguished kink from *vanilla* – mainstream, usually heteronormative sex – they also took pains to distinguish kink from abuse.

*BDSM* is a portmanteau of bondage/discipline, domination/submission, sadism/masochism. It, too, is an umbrella term, and different aspects of BDSM do not necessarily imply one another, although they may overlap or be undertaken at the same time.

BDSM could describe much of the mainstream iconography of kinky sex: the proverbial “whips and chains.” BDSM is a large part of the constellation of kink.

*Fetish* is commonly used term that describes two separate but related phenomena. One usage refers to sexual fetishism: being highly sexually aroused by a very specific animate or inanimate object. However, it also refers to a style of dress: “fetish wear” or “fetwear” may include leather, latex, PVC, rubber, uniforms, etc. Wearers of fetish fashion are not necessarily kinky.

Because terminology is used so variably, however, it may be difficult to determine what is “kinky” and what is vanilla. For example, some take the maximalist approach, claiming that anyone who has firmly held a partner’s wrists during sex or given a playful pinch *in media res* has taken a step down this road (Brame & Brame, 1996). On the other hand, I have known several friends to privately express an interest in slapping and spitting during sex, yet who also emphatically claim not to be kinky.

Also, without self-identification as kinky, it is likewise difficult to determine whether or not a person is kinky. From the perspective of a hardcore player, casual flirtation with BDSM may be seen as vanilla; others may engage in acts observers may call kinky, but refuse to identify themselves as such. One interviewee described the distinction as “capital-k, lower-k,” meaning that those who self-identify as kinky may be considered unambiguously “Kinky,” whereas those who may engage in similar sex acts could be described as “kinky.”

Two interviewees for this study resisted identification with the term “BDSM.” Although the other two did not object to being identified with BDSM, both used the term “kink” heavily as well. The common ground – and the reason those who don’t identify with BDSM are included – is that all play significant BDSM-related information roles. Also, all have made reference to being personally involved in activities that could be described with the language of BDSM.

I have decided to use “BDSM,” rather than “kink,” as the governing term for this research; both terms, however, were used interchangeably in the interviews unless specifically distinguished. In the broadest sense, “the BDSM community” refers to the community of BDSM practitioners who may never meet or communicate directly, but who participate in the same discourse and partake of many common information resources. I use “BDSM practitioners” to refer to members of a community of practice; the community of practice consists of real and virtual communities, as well as isolated individuals who identify with the discourse of kink and BDSM. Isolated individuals who engage in “lower-k” kinky practices but who do not identify or associate with the discourse are outside the scope of this research.

### *Differences in BDSM communities and practitioners*

Although this research purports to discuss BDSM in general, the reader should be aware that, beyond individual practitioners’ idiosyncrasies, there may be major differences in BDSM practice according numerous factors. I would like to add region and generation to “sexual orientation, gender, and preferred activities,” noted above. Unfortunately, close analysis of these differences is beyond the scope of this project.

Especially prior to the development of virtual kinky communities, there has been regional variation in BDSM. Interviewees Midori and Morpheus described the pre-Internet world of BDSM as being fragmented and developing in pockets, which would sometimes be bridged by individuals. This leads to regional variation in culture, practice and style. Morpheus described some superficial differences in practice in the Europe as opposed to North America, and Midori described an entirely different set of sexual morals in Japan which has led to the development of

an entirely different culture of BDSM and kink. Different legal regimes across jurisdictions have also led to variations in practice.

Interviewees also acknowledged generational differences in the BDSM practice. The major difference seems to have been in how people have discovered BDSM, and as a result one may conceive of a pre-Internet generation and an Internet generation in BDSM.

## **Literature Review**

This project is situated in LIS research in two ways. First, it is a case study of information behaviour in a specific field. There are numerous precedents for this. Second, it is a contribution to LIS literature on BDSM, and on sex and sexuality in general.

There appears to be scarce literature on BDSM in the field of LIS. Searches in both LISA and Library Literature for “BDSM,” as well as related and alternative terms, found only a scant few articles with any mention of BDSM. Some articles are relevant to BDSM materials in general, but none contribute to the understanding of the information behaviours of kinky people. Rather, these findings are concerned with libraries’ treatment of erotic, controversial and “adult” materials,” and issues of freedom of access to information in relation to these subjects.

Likewise, the body of literature on information behaviour concerning sex and sexuality in LIS is small. Notable examples include the work of Amanda Spink and of Paulette Rothbauer.

Spink and others (Jansen & Spink, 2005; A. Spink & Jansen, 2004; A. Spink, 2003; A. Spink, Partridge, & Jansen, 2006) have conducted extensive research into the results of Internet search queries for sexual terms. Her research highlights the high proportion of sex-related user search queries in Internet search engines, suggesting a profound and non-trivial interest in sex information. However, the nature of this interest has yet to be fully articulated from an LIS perspective.

Most significantly, Paulette Rothbauer's work on the information seeking behaviour of young queer and lesbian women (Rothbauer, 2005a; Rothbauer, 2005b) has provided a model and inspiration for my own research. Her research centered on a body of interviews about how the reading habits of young women affected their social and personal identities. I believe that my research follows in the steps of Rothbauer's, conducting qualitative research into information behaviour by members of non-mainstream sexual communities.

Like Rothbauer, I have situated my research in the area of ELIS. ELIS is concerned with information outside the realm of work and suggests that information behaviour may be undertaken in ways other than intentional, directed queries (Savolainen, 1995). Instead, ELIS suggests that we view some forms information behaviour as exercises of “mastery of life”: that is to say, that information behaviour is embedded in the fabric of everyday, practical consciousness by allowing the individual to maintain a certain order in the management of her life. “Way of life” refers to an individual's sense of normalcy and order, and the work of mastery is the act maintaining this order.

I would like to suggest that sex-related information behaviour has a great deal to do with the mastery and management of a way of life. Individuals may seek information to reconcile conflicts between received beliefs and opinions on sex with idiosyncratic and unorthodox sexual desire. This is evident in the chorus of “is there something wrong with me /my partner/my friend/etc?” addressed to sex experts such as Dan Savage, Gloria Brame, Sascha and others. The work of mastery may also be identified in the attempt to find satisfaction for kinky desires. Individuals may also build a repertoire of knowledge about a variety of sexual practices and

outlets, as well as specialized social situations in which these may be exercised. Curiosity also plays a major role: interviewees noted an interest in and curiosity about sex in general, suggesting that knowledge of the panoply of human sexuality may be an end in itself.

I should note, however, that a great deal of BDSM-related information seeking does follow a classic model, in which the individual forms an intentional, directed query to extract information from a specific source.

BDSM-related information seeking may be further examined by using the categories of “higher” and “lower” contexts (Kari & Hartel, 2007), dividing everyday information behaviour into the banal (lower contexts) and the pleasurable or profound (higher contexts). It is in the category of these higher information contexts that we may find behaviours that either allow the individual to escape the dullness of everyday life, or contribute to the user’s personal development. Kari and Hartel identify sexuality as an exemplary “pleasurable and profound” thing, and therefore as a higher context of information behaviour. Similarly, some LIS researchers have begun to investigate information behaviour in connection with the pursuit of leisure (Hartel, 2003; Stebbins, 2009). The study of leisure is often neglected by LIS researchers because it is perceived as “frivolous,” and that information associated with such behaviour would be “equally banal” (Stebbins, 2009).

Finally, BDSM information resources and practices emphasize health and safety, making consumer health information a possible avenue for the study of information in this context. Using the two-fold lens of leisure and health also preserves a certain ambiguity in the domain itself: it is at once a light, pleasurable pursuit, and a topic with serious consequences. Describing BDSM solely as a leisure pursuit risks trivializing it; describing it solely as a health matter risks sterilizing or bowdlerizing it.

## **Methods**

This research is based on four in-depth, open-ended, in-person interviews with people playing key information for BDSM practitioners. Because of the limited time and resources available for research, interviewees were purposively sampled on the basis of maximal involvement with BDSM, in order to explore as many facets of BDSM-related information behaviour as possible. Unfortunately, several promising interviewees were not available in the time frame of the project. Other potential interviewees were identified and contacted, but did not respond.

Each subject interviewed has 10-20 years’ involvement with BDSM, ranging from local to global involvement: two have written books on aspects of BDSM; one runs a commercial venue for BDSM-oriented events; one runs a social networking site of BDSM practitioners and kinky people; three lead seminars and workshops, and assume the role of educator in some way or another.

I contacted three interviewees directly, and one through a shared acquaintance. I approached one directly at a BDSM workshop and two were contacted through FetLife, a social networking site for kinky people and BDSM practitioners. My FetLife profile was important for establishing myself as an active BDSM practitioner.

A formal interview schedule was not used for the interviews. Interviewees were asked about their use of BDSM-related terminology (to establish a shared language with the interviewer), their personal histories and current involvement with BDSM, their teaching/learning/sharing practices, and speculation about the behaviour of BDSM practitioners in general.

An emergent coding scheme was used to analyze the data. Many common themes were prominent in the interviews. These include: the nature and information role of various conceptions of community; determining and establishing personal reputability, as well as information credibility; the consequences of information poverty; modes of information seeking and sharing. Distinctive features of BDSM-related information seeking were also identified.

### *Interviewee profile*

I interviewed four subjects in Toronto and Montreal between November, 2009, and February, 2010. Two were female, two were male. Ages range from 32 to 45. All report having been involved in BDSM and kink-related activities since their teens or early 20s. All are identified here by their scene names.

Black Orchid is the owner of a new sex-positive event venue in Toronto called RENEGADE, which hosts regular social and play parties for the kinky community. She was Membership Director for the initial Steering Committee of early Toronto BDSM organization XCorrigia, and teaches workshops. I interviewed Black Orchid at RENEGADE.

Morpheus is the author of the recent book *How to be Kinky* (Morpheus, 2008) and the upcoming book *How to be Kinkier*. Based in Toronto, he has taught workshops throughout North America for the past ten years; he says that 75% of his teaching and 90% of his book sales occur in the US. He is well-known as an expert in rope bondage and often does rigging for porn film shoots. He has organized a public display of rope bondage concurrent with Toronto's Nuit Blanche for the past three years, the most recent of which was featured in the documentary *Comfortable? I Can Fix That* (Ramnauth, 2010). He was the only subject to not disclose his real name. I interviewed Morpheus at a restaurant in Toronto.

Midori is an internationally-renowned sex educator, author of several books on sex and kink, and an artist. She is based in San Francisco but frequently travels to teach workshops and perform at kinky events. She is the author of *The Sensual Art of Japanese Bondage* (Midori, 2001), the first English-language book on Japanese rope bondage (also known as *shibari* or *kinkabu*) and is generally credited with introducing it to a widespread Western audience. I interviewed Midori at the Toronto Reference Library.

John Baku is the founder and owner of FetLife, "a free social network for the BDSM & fetish community" (*FetLife*, 2010). In operation since 2007, FetLife now boasts over 400,000 users worldwide, including large concentrations in New York, California, southern Ontario and Australia. I interviewed him at his home in Montreal.

Although Midori and John Baku play important information roles for practitioners of BDSM, both disavow membership in BDSM communities. Both discussed BDSM and kink within the broader scope of sexuality and sexual freedom. While Midori claimed not to be a member of BDSM scenes or communities, John Baku suggested that the very term "BDSM" implied membership and, more importantly, a specific subculture with a distinct fashion. John Baku identifies as "kinky," as did Black Orchid; Black Orchid, however, had no compunctions about being associated with BDSM. However, Midori and John Baku also acknowledge that their activities cross over significantly with BDSM. Midori's workshops and books have a large audience of self-identified BDSM practitioners, although one need not identify as a practitioner to use them. John Baku likewise acknowledges that FetLife is largely used by self-identified BDSM practitioners.

As a participant-observer, my own prior knowledge and experience inform some aspects of this study.

## Findings

### *Information sources and information grounds*

The concept of information grounds is particularly useful for understanding how information is sought and shared by BDSM practitioners (Fisher, 2005; Savolainen, 2009). Fisher cites Pettigrew, who identifies information grounds as “environment[s] temporarily created when people come together for a singular purpose but from whose behaviour emerges a social atmosphere that fosters spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information” (Fisher, 2005). This concept allows us to see information sharing as a natural byproduct of socializing. However, information sharing in BDSM-oriented social situations is not just accidental: the interviewees all highlighted the importance of intentional information seeking and sharing, not only at formal instructional events (such as workshops), but also when practitioners actively seek out one another in order to learn and teach.

Interviewees Black Orchid and Morpheous both stressed the importance of face-to-face information sharing as being the most reliable method of acquiring reliable information. Face-to-face methods could include formal workshops, mentoring, and informal information sharing.

A growing bibliography of hardcopy and online resources are also important information sources. Such resources may include instructional manuals and how-to guides, as well as general introductions to BDSM. Black Orchid suggested that printed materials may be valuable for introducing core concepts but that face-to-face methods are more appropriate for developing advanced techniques. Online resources will be considered in a separate section, below.

I have developed a provisional enumeration of information grounds in Table 1, based on the results of the four interviews (see Appendix).

### *Information practices*

Information behaviour among BDSM practitioners fulfills a variety of roles. The three most important roles are: technical knowledge (including health and safety information, technique), social knowledge (navigating social circles, establishing reputation and credibility) and knowledge of identity (finding and providing support, self-assurance).

Technical information behaviour is often an explicit affair among BDSM practitioners. As mentioned above, such behaviour tends to center on the simultaneous development of techniques for exploring and maximizing pleasure while minimizing the emotional and physical risks of the activities. Practitioners may find such information in hardcopy and online resources, in online discussion fora and in social interaction, and through formal instructional methods such as mentorship and workshops.

Appropriation and “perversion” of non-kinky techniques is also a part of technical information behaviour. Examples of outside knowledge appropriated for use by BDSM practitioners include: medical techniques (both for providing care and for perversion as form of BDSM play), knowledge of load-bearing properties of structures and restraints, martial arts, fashion and textiles, electricity, equestrian equipment and techniques, and more.

Social information behaviour is much more subtle and complex. One aspect of such behaviour involves the credibility and cognitive authority – both the development of one’s own, and the evaluation of others’. Cognitive authority refers to the credibility of second-hand knowledge from outside an individual’s realm of direct experience, and deals with the question

of whether or not a source of information “knows what it’s talking about” with respect to the topic at hand (Rieh, 2005). A person, for example, may possess considerable cognitive authority with respect to rope bondage, but none at all with respect to play piercing. Rieh notes that cognitive authority may apply both to people, as well as to “books, instruments, organizations, and institutions.” The evaluation of cognitive authority relates directly to pursuit of technical knowledge.

The establishment and evaluation of reputation is also important among BDSM practitioners. According to Morpheous, successful participants in BDSM communities must establish that they are “good people”: respectful, trustworthy and safe. This indicates that practitioners’ concern with safety and the diminution of risk is not simply a question of technique: practitioners must satisfy themselves that they will not be subject to physical or emotional abuse from partners when engaged in BDSM activities. Associated with the establishment and evaluation of reputation are practices of vouching, ostracism, news-sharing and gossip, and the establishment of norms of behaviour.

Social information behaviour also includes finding and identifying potential friends and partners in BDSM practice, and locating BDSM-oriented events and groups. In non-kinky social contexts, these practices may involve use of codes and esoteric language. For example, Midori related a story told to her by a workshop participant, who was asked “Do you know Midori?” by a co-worker; Midori’s name was used as a codeword, signifying “kinky.”

Knowledge of identity and more personal information behaviours also exist. Most significantly, these practices concern the incorporation and reconciliation of kinky desires and BDSM practice into personal identity. John Baku discussed this at length, noting his own difficulties reconciling the desire to be sexually dominant with cultural values advocating respect towards women. This process sparked an interest in sexual freedom and self-determination, which led to the creation of FetLife as a forum in which people with nonmainstream sexual desires could discuss their interests and address feelings of isolation or of abnormality.

Coincidentally, identity-related information practices in BDSM can be described using Ross’ six functions of reading (1999):

1. an awakening or new perspectives;
2. models for identity;
3. reassurance, comfort, confirmation of self-worth, strength;
4. a connection with others and an awareness of not being alone;
5. courage to make a change;
6. acceptance.

Table 2 provides a provisional list of generic information practices identified in the four interviews (see Appendix).

#### *“Community” as information ground*

Real or virtual, the notion of “community” plays an important role in information practices among practitioners of BDSM. Real communities may have a variety of scales and levels, from small groups of play partners, to support groups, to larger, regional groups that congregate at social functions. In some cases there are formal groups and organizations with membership and regulations; however, there are also many loose-knit groups which come together at munches or play parties.

The Internet has given rise to a large number of active, virtual communities through social networking (FetLife), dating sites (bondage.com and collarme), discussion boards and forums, blogs and websites. The interviewees all agree that the Internet is responsible for massive expansion in awareness of, identification with and participation in BDSM, given that the Internet has allowed people to educate and express themselves without fear of social reprisals or for shame of being publically associated with BDSM.

Black Orchid described the early BDSM scene in Toronto as a series of events where people came to find likeminded people and potential partners, and to seek and share information. What distinguished community members from non-members, in her opinion, was that the scene was comprised of those who reflected upon their interests and chose to develop them further, by seeking information or by finding partners. In this light, one might consider the BDSM scene as an information artefact. She also said that this was characteristic of pre-Internet, computerized communications using bulletin board systems (BBS). She describes the users of the BBS she frequented as being people who shared a common interest in BDSM who used those sites to share and seek information about acts, about events and about other information sources.

Community events are sites of factual information seeking. They also serve an important social function and are therefore sites of other information work. The scene is a social setting for finding potential partners. Furthermore, the scene allows individuals to find like-minded people to share their interests, seek affirmation and find reassurance.

Community events are also the sites of the development of new norms of behaviour. All interviewees agree that codes of conduct and dress, and the development of language and terminology, has occurred and continues to occur in the community. The significant work taking place here is the codifying of sexual desire and interest into a subculture with a vernacular, social norms, and a stable of authorities, icons and experts.

Within the scene, members are able to develop social capital. Black Orchid and Morpheous spoke of a set of ongoing practices relating to providing proof of a person's reputability. Prospective members of the scene are expected to show themselves, at various events, to be "okay people." That is to say, to show themselves to be considerate, dependable, perceptive and safe. Morpheous suggested that the BDSM community is comprised of informal levels of membership (although these may be formalized in particular subcultures), to which new members may be admitted by proving their reputability and interest. There is also a common practice of vouching for newer members as a way of procuring invitations to play and to come to events. Conversely, both described instances of ostracism, wherein new or established members of the community showed themselves to be undependable or unsafe, and were therefore excluded from future participation; as Morpheous says, "people talk." BDSM communities are self-policing.

The development of norms also leads to the development of trends and peer pressure. Trends may include specific BDSM sex acts (rope bondage and jeweled butt plugs are discussed in the interviews) as well as fashion and events. Peer pressure leads to the perceived need to conform to a standard of behaviour. Midori points out, however, that the representation of norms may be heavily distorted, especially on the Internet. Since the BDSM community is a site for sharing information and networking around shared interests under mainstream sanction, members' kinky activities are often represented in greater proportion than they actually occupy in their lives:

Joe Pervert might only have... let's say he has this absolutely amazing scene once a year. Are we going to hear about the rest of the 364 days, where at best

he made friends with his left hand? No! No. But we are going to hear about the *amazing night he went to this party and oh my god this woman...* you know, picked me up and I had this scene that I never thought I would imagine.

This exaggeration has had the effect, she says, of preventing others from identifying as kinky or as partaking in the community, feeling that their activities do not live up to the standards projected by others' personae.

BDSM scenes vary in their norms and practices from region to region. This is especially true of the pre-Internet area, when communities developed in isolated pockets even across a relatively small area such as southern Ontario. The interviewees identified differences ranging from superficial (use of symbolic jewelry for slaves in North America, but not in Austria) to prudential (differing legal regimes in Canada and the US) to social and moral (greater acceptance of sex as a part of life in Japan, whereas it is shrouded in shame in North America). The movement of individuals, the dissemination of print media, and the development of the Internet have led to the cross-pollination of regional scenes' practices.

Midori offered an alternative to the model of community, referring to the development of a sex-positive movement in San Francisco in the 60s and 70s. She suggests that a movement is characterized by more casual social affiliations and lesser emphasis on self-identification and membership than a community; a movement is a community of practice and interest.

#### *The Internet as information source*

All interviewees acknowledged an epochal shift in BDSM practice engendered by the development of the Internet. The development of Internet has facilitated and accelerated the sharing of factual information and the creation of social networks. It has also been a double-edged sword.

The Internet has spread information about BDSM to a wide audience. Whereas seeking information and kinky partners may previously have been fraught with shame, fear of legal or social sanction, or simply have been extremely difficult, the Internet now provides a safe forum with easily-accessible information. Through the Internet, serendipitous and unintentional discovery of BDSM-related information become much more likely. Furthermore, the Internet may provide a greater wealth of information than would be available in one's local BDSM community, as well as providing greater opportunity for communication from one regional community to another. There is a suggestion that BDSM is becoming an increasingly banal concept in contemporary mainstream, media-saturated society (Weiss, 2006).

The Internet has led to several problematic developments, however. First, the quality of information available on the Internet does not translate to a quality of information: information available online may not be realistic or safe. Second, there is a problem of reputation and expertise: the mechanisms for building social capital and self-policing in real communities cannot be easily transferred to the Internet. As Morpheous suggests, anyone can say anything online, and whereas more established and experienced BDSM practitioners may recognize cues that betray the writer's inexpertise, novices may not and those who acquire their formative information online run the risk of developing harmful or unsafe ideas about BDSM. Related to these problems, there is a tremendous problem of lying and dissimulation online as people misrepresent themselves, their exploits and their authority online. Finally, as Midori stated, the Internet leads to a misrepresentation of BDSM in the lives of its practitioners. This was discussed above, in the section on community; an added dimension of this feature is that novice with an interest in BDSM may start to emulate these exaggerated representations in their own practices.

Black Orchid and Morpheous made a point of not dismissing the Internet as a site of information sharing, but emphasized the need to take information found online with a grain of salt. Morpheous suggested a kind of *realpolitik* of the Internet: the medium has become so pervasive and widely used that it is increasingly difficult to opt in or out of it; rather, the BDSM community should adapt its practices to the existence and use of Internet and collaborative technologies (social networking, calendars and meeting planners) to ensure that novices are able to find safe and reputable grounds for information sharing.

#### *Perception of information need*

Most prominent in the interviewees' characterizing for kinky information behaviour were: curiosity; seeking pleasure, arousal and titillation; satisfying desire and fantasy.

As Dervin (1992) and Savolainen (1995) note, the motivation for information behaviour is not always reducible to the intentional seeking of factual data. However, interviewees did also cite perceived lack of information as a motivation for directed seeking. Such intentional information seeking was generally concerned with learning new techniques and safety concerns. Black Orchid cited physical and emotional health and safety as prominent concerns in BDSM activity.

The need to find potential sex and play partners is another focus of kinky information behaviour. Corollary to this is the need to identify unsafe or undesirable partners.

Finally, there is a therapeutic need in kinky information seeking. Some may seek for ways of coping with shame or conflicts of self-identity. Others may seek means of reconciling their sexual desires with political, social or ethical beliefs: a common example is feminist women with submissive, heterosexual desires. The need for social affiliation, solidarity, affirmation and support is another focus of information behaviour.

#### *Information poverty: obstacles and consequences*

Three interviewees' personal histories with BDSM practices were characterized by barriers and lack of access to information. Black Orchid and Midori both noted that, as their respect interests in BDSM-related activities developed, there was simply an absence of information resources. Both described processes of seeking out individuals who were reputed to hold BDSM-related knowledge, and learning directly from them.

Interviewees also discussed familial, social and cultural barriers to information about BDSM and sexuality in general. Personal feelings of shame and confusion might lead to repression in the absence of positive, liberating discourses on non-mainstream sexuality. Even where individuals were able to acknowledge their desires, however, they might face a lack of reliable information sources. Black Orchid discussed the challenges she faced as a young adult who was curious about sex, but who was unable to find information to satisfy her curiosity; administrative authorities, such as family and school, were unsatisfactory. Midori and Black Orchid discussed legal sanctions against BDSM as barriers not only to practice but to information. Midori noted that legal sanction was a powerful deterrent to the development of gay male BDSM practice: "If it's illegal for gay men to fuck, it is *incredibly* illegal for gay men to beat each other and fuck."

The development of real, BDSM-oriented communities is a response to information poverty with respect to BDSM practices, as well as providing sites for meeting and play. Similarly, the publication of seminal books on BDSM instruction – including, among others, Gloria and William Brame's *Different Loving* (1996), Jay Wiseman's *SM 101: A Realistic*

*Introduction* (1996) and *Erotic Bondage Handbook* (2000), Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy's *Topping and Bottoming Books* (2003 and 2001), Trevor Jacques' *On the Safe Edge* (1993) and Midori's *Sensual Art of Japanese Bondage* (Midori, 2001) – is a direct response relatively information-poor context of BDSM, especially outside of underground and geographically isolated communities, prior to the development of the Internet.

Subsequent to the wide spread of the Internet and the proliferation of BDSM information online, information poverty is less serious a problem – at least, where individuals are able to access the Internet freely. However, as discussed above in the section on the Internet, BDSM practitioners today face a new set of barriers to quality information, centering on the dissemination of misinformation and distorted representations of information online.

The consequences of information poverty in BDSM are manifold. On a personal level, lack of access to quality BDSM information can exacerbate shame and frustration over unsatisfied erotic desire. Black Orchid and Morpheous pointed out that the most important role of information in BDSM practice is to prevent abuse: safe, sane and consensual BDSM play is strictly distinguished from unsafe and non-consensual abuse. Practitioners who fail to communicate or to read others' cues risk committing or being subject to abuse. Morpheous discussed a controversy in the Toronto BDSM community in 2009, in which a dominant disregarded several submissives' unwillingness to play and their protests against his advances. In the eyes of the community, according to Morpheous, this constituted a serious case of abuse and resulted in the ostracization of the dominant. Another consequence of such abuse is that the community or specific events may develop a reputation for being unsafe, leading to the departure of community members. Finally miscommunication and the failure of information sharing may lead to unsafe practices and, consequently, physical or emotional harm directly resulting from play.

See Table 3 (Appendix) for a provisional list of barriers to information and consequences of information poverty in BDSM.

### *Risk*

Negotiation of risk is a major area of focus in kink information behaviour. This may be understood as the simultaneous move to maximize pleasure while minimizing physical and emotional harm. "Harm" is generally defined as unwanted and undesirable side-effects. However, the concept of harm is also subject to negotiation and may differ from one practitioner to another: some find a certain degree of bruising and scaring acceptable, and others not at all.

### *The lighter side of BDSM*

While safety and prudence form a large part of BDSM discourse, interviewees generally construed BDSM as a pleasurable, light pursuit. Besides the pursuit of immediate physical, emotional and aesthetic gratification through BDSM activities, there is a strong sense of playfulness which pervades many aspects of BDSM, including information behaviour.

Curiosity, titillation and novelty are important motivators for information behaviour. All interviewees spoke of the attraction of exploring new things for its own sake. Information behaviour here seems gratuitous, not reducible to "need" or "lack."

Imagination, creativity, improvisation, interpretation, adaptation were also prominent tropes in the interviews. Interviewees spoke of imagining and devising new forms of play, new techniques and new symbols, as well as adapting and interpreting objects, symbols and language at hand for one's own purpose and pleasure. This is employed in the concept of the "pervertible"

(the everyday object perverted to kinky usage), as well as in the appropriation of symbolism and iconography from other areas of life, particularly in roleplay and fetishism. The tendency toward creativity also evident in kinky people's creation of their own toys, and in resources such as the *Better Built Bondage Book* (Kent, 2007).

*Defining and delimiting BDSM: development of norms, language and identities*

Interviews featured a great deal of talk about the development and concretizing of widely-recognized norms and language, as well as the development of the social and institutional foundations of BDSM and kinky communities. In the process of developing and defining BDSM, there may also be a two-fold movement to distinguish BDSM and kinky from abuse on the one hand, and vanilla sex on the other. However, the distinction of kinky from vanilla sex is ruled by Midori, who sees both as equally legitimate and non-exclusive expressions of erotic desire.

There was also talk of redefining normalcy, as well as the ambiguity of the concept of "normal" when one's social context is defined by unorthodox and non-mainstream behaviour. This was highlighted in a particular exchange with Morpheous:

Commonplace... To me, it's almost like, that's just the world that I move in.  
See a guy in a puppy dog leash... [pantomimes interacting w/ dog and owner]  
"hi, how are ya? Can I talk to your dog?" That's just, you know, that's normal. [pause]. Kind of. Kind of.

The development of a specialized language permits the articulation of kinky identities and acts. In some cases, such as when social or legal censure are feared, it enables kinky people to communicate esoterically. It has also led, in Midori's opinion, to such over-specification of identity that it becomes problematic and socially fragmentary. According to Black Orchid, the vernacular of kinky is most useful as a "conversation starter." That language of kinky identities does not accurately describe the subjectivity of any real person, and should not be expected to.

The relationship between the actions, language and identity of BDSM is ambiguous. According to Midori, we may speak about "Kink" (people who identify themselves and their actions as kinky) and "kink" (kinky acts done without self-identification). The language of BDSM is least problematic when used to discuss people who consciously identify or associate with the discourse.

Midori suggested that there has been an historical move from using specialized sexual vocabulary as a "language of appetite" to becoming a "language of identity." Terms such as "top," "bottom," "masochist," and "sadist," she said, used to describe sexual desires or whims, whereas they are generally now used to describe fixed identities. She also suggested that the Internet, as a forum for making declarative statements about oneself, has had a role to play in this change.

The language of self-discovery and self-expression is prevalent in BDSM, evoking a discourse of authenticity. This brings to mind Kari and Hartel's writing about "profound" pursuits as those which are "deep and sublime [and] reflect humanity's possibilities for reaching its full potential" (Hartel, 2003). Black Orchid and Morpheous both describe moments of epiphany in their personal histories, and serendipitous discoveries of things that "fit." BDSM is not seen as a mundane necessity, but as being more personally rewarding. The *journey* is a common trope for describing this search/discovery, but did not arise in the interviews.

However, interviewees also identified difficulties in reconciling BDSM with quotidian identities are evident in the shame and conflicts of identity described by the interviewees. Morpheous also spoke at length about social gender constructs and feminist beliefs, and how these may conflict with some people's kinky predilections and require resolution. I am also

aware that there is controversy among self-identified feminists about whether BDSM in general and female submission in particular are compatible with feminism and progressive discourses on sexuality. I am unable to comment or expand on this here, although interviewees suggested that BDSM is empowering and/or compatible with feminism.

Idiosyncrasy may be related to the concept of authenticity: the recognition on the part of all interviewees that kink, desire and play are deeply personal and vary from person to person. Similarly, all interviewees spoke of the importance of awareness, information and self-consciousness in the pursuit of pleasure. There is a sense that more informed, more self-aware sex is better sex.

### *Other tropes of information behaviour*

Several recurrent and noteworthy tropes appeared in the interviews.

*Serendipity*: chance encounters with people, places and information sources figured prominently in all interviewees' personal histories. Morpheous attributed his book deal to sheer luck, and attributed much of his early learning about BDSM to a romantic partner who was a professional dominatrix with a well-equipped dungeon. Black Orchid spoke of chance encounters with titillating and informative books and films. Midori attributed the success of her bondage book to chance.

*Inaugural partners*: three of the four interviewees mentioned inaugural partners who initiated them into the world of BDSM and served as initial information sources.

*The solitary reader, "nerdiness"*: Black Orchid and Morpheous spoke of having been solitary readers as children. Interviewees also described aspects of BDSM as nerdy or geeky.

*Authority and expertise*: individual members of the scene are perceived as having their own "territory," niche or expertise. Morpheous talked about respecting others' expertise and letting them speak for themselves; for example, he deferred to Midori's authority in discussing matters relating to rope bondage.

*Discretion and secrecy*: these were acknowledged as concerns, to varying degrees. Morpheous will not allow his real name or photograph to be published out of concern for consequences to his career. All acknowledge that discretion and secrecy, historically and currently, play roles in people's information behaviour where BDSM is concerned. Reasons for this include fear of social or legal reprisal and shame.

*Fantasy vs. Reality*: Black Orchid spoke of the need to distinguish fantasy from reality in the early days of her interest in BDSM. Morpheous and Midori spoke of skewed representations of sexual adventure online. Morpheous spoke of the need to distinguish real danger from play, and to learn when to switch between the fantastic persona in play and the responsible self in case of crisis.

*Unsanctioned learning*: there is no official or mainstream sanction for the pursuit of kinky information. This echoes Rothbauer's findings with respect to the difficulties faced by young queer and lesbian women faced in selecting reading materials (Rothbauer, 2005a).

## **Discussion**

### *Limitations*

There are serious, inherent limitations to this research project. I undertook this project as part of a two-semester, independent study course as part of my program of study towards a Master of Library and Information Science. During the first semester I was a full-time co-op student, and during the second semester I had a full-time courseload. As a result, I was unable to devote the time and energy this research properly requires, or that a Masters or Ph.D thesis would entail. Although suitable for an exploratory study, the small sample size of interviewees prevents this study from being considered a proper ethnography of BDSM practitioners.

### *Opportunities for future research*

This research project has identified several areas for further study with respect to information behaviour in BDSM. The most obvious avenue for study would be case studies of specific communities of practitioners. Recognizing, once again, differences according to geographic location, age, sexual orientation and specific BDSM practices, it would be most valuable to bring LIS research to bear on a specific group of individuals.

Further research could also focus on specific areas of information practice in BDSM: technical, social or identity. For example, a great deal remains to be examined about the establishment, use and evaluation of social capital, reputation and cognitive authority among members of specific BDSM communities. LIS researchers could also focus on the use of particular resources, such as workshops, books or the Internet.

The most significant omission in the present research is consideration of information practices in BDSM play. Information is not just a background to BDSM play; it is also a vital part of play itself. BDSM practitioners are concerned with a variety of information in play. For example, language is often used ironically in play and must be negotiated: “rape play” does not signify actual rape, but the consensual agreement that one person will force him or herself upon the other, who will perform resistance and protest while, in fact, consenting to the act. Likewise, “safewords” are commonly used by practitioners who recognize that screams, tears, swearing and the word “no” are not indications that the top or dominant should stop causing these; instead the safeword is used as a kind of meta-language to stop or pause the scene.

Information use *in situ* also concerns the interpretation of bodily states. This may include recognition of circulation blockages caused by bondage, signaled by loss of colour or coolness in certain body parts. It may also include deciphering a bottom or submissive’s attempt to interpret and communicate their experiences under duress or when speech is impeded, including communicating while gagged or while suffering from shock.

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## Appendix: Tables 1-3

*Table 1: Information grounds and sources in BDSM.*

*Social/interpersonal:* formal groups; informal social networks and friendships; sex and play partners; scene negotiation with potential partners; “grandfathering and mentoring; fashion.

*Places/events:* GTs (get-togethers) and munches; fetnights and play parties, both public and private; workshops; stores; dungeons; conventions; porn shoots.

*Media:* books; magazines; videos; dating services; photography; internet (BBS, social networking, dating, blogs, personal and commercial websites). Media may be either purposively informative or pornographic. Both kinds are prominently used.

*Non-kink sources:* all interviewees emphasized that a person’s pre- or extra-kinky knowledge and experience have a strong impact on their play. Among others, sources discussed in the interviews include: whitewater rescue training; farming; medical and health training; childhood fantasies; formal teacher training; knowledge and practice of fine art; pop culture and media.

*Table 2: Information practices among BDSM practitioners.*

Intentional fact-seeking  
Mentorship  
Instruction  
Writing (creating content) and reading (consuming content)  
Vouching  
Ostracism  
Gossip/sharing social news  
Developing reputation/social capital  
Coded signal; sending and receiving cues  
Seeking friends and partners  
Appropriation, adaption, interpretation and subversion:  
Of bodies of knowledge and practice  
Of language  
Of objects  
Development of:  
Norms of behaviour  
Shared language  
Experts, icons and authorities  
Social types  
Advocacy outside the community  
Demonstration  
Discussion of problems and conflict  
Scene negotiation and play  
Development of site-specific protocols  
Event planning and advertising

*Table 3: Barriers to information and consequences of information poverty.*

<b>Barriers to information</b>	<b>Consequences of information poverty</b>
Lack of contextualizing information Absence of authorities Legal risk Safety risks Taboo Mainstream sanction Shame Ability to accurately judge reputability Secrecy Judgment/discrimination Interpersonal politics Lying and misrepresentation	Abuse Loss of standing Tarnishing the image BDSM and of specific communities Frustration of sexual desire Hurt and injury, both physical and psychological Loss of community members