

# Dilemmas of a subculture: An analysis of BDSM blogs about *Fifty Shades of Grey*

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## Abstract

Recently, much has been written in the mass media about the novel and film *Fifty Shades of Grey*. It was widely portrayed as an example of BDSM (a common abbreviation for the terms bondage, discipline, dominance, submissivity, sadism and masochism) subculture and used as a symbol of sadomasochistic identity. But is this public view based on the self image of BDSM subcultural members or is it a figment of the imagination of writers and journalists? This article presents the voice of BDSM activists, who are silenced and excluded from the public debate. Using a virtual ethnographic method, we analyse the BDSM blogosphere as a platform for subcultural expressions of opinion. We combine this with a documentary analysis. In doing so, we examine how BDSM subculture members perceive themselves in contrast to the mainstream view of them pictured in the book *Fifty Shades of Grey*. This article investigates to what extent the subcultural conception of BDSM corresponds to the book's depiction and where it differs fundamentally.

## Keywords

Authenticity, BDSM, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, subculture, virtual ethnography

## Introduction

Recently, many studies have emerged on the BDSM (a common abbreviation for bondage, discipline, dominance, submissivity, sadism and masochism) community coming from different academic disciplines and perspectives. The psychological and sociological studies have focused mainly on the psychosocial characteristics of the

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BDSM practitioners (Richters et al., 2008; Wismeijer and van Assen, 2013), the experienced stigma of sadomasochism (Brown, 2010; Lindemann, 2013; Meeker, 2013), the depathologisation of BDSM and the need to demystify and decriminalise consensual SM (Beckmann, 2001a, 2009; Ridinger, 2006 in Kleinplatz and Moser, 2006; Thompson, 1994; White, 2006 in Kleinplatz and Moser, 2006; Wright, 2010) and the psychological mechanisms of BDSM – either in a broader sense (Connolly, 2006), focused on couple dynamics in sexual and asexual pairs (Cutler, 2003; Sloan, 2015), or on the construction of sexuality itself (Faccio et al., 2014). Meanwhile, clinical psychology research has focused on how to work with clients practising BDSM (Barker et al., 2007; Hoff and Sprott, 2009; Jozífková, 2007), while socio-biological, biological and medical research has dealt with the possible pre-conditioned causes of BDSM tendencies (Yost and Hunter, 2012), the measured physical and sexual reactions of BDSM practitioners (Monteiro et al., 2015; Stockwell et al., 2010) or the biometric system for the safety of BDSM practitioners (Noessel, 2006). Ethnographic research has analysed the development of the BDSM communities in Germany, the USA and Brazil (de Melo, 2010; Facchini and Machado, 2013; Luminais, 2012; Martin, 2011; Weiss, 2006b). Beckmann (2001b) analyses the development and diversification of the BDSM scene in London. She focuses on the commodification of the scene and the manner in which knowledge is created and distributed. She further discusses the manner in which BDSM is seen as a pathology and the way it impacts the mass media. She is particularly interested in subcultural practices and the importance of consent, as well as the subcultural rules concerning dominants. The study shows that BDSM has a variety of meanings for the practitioners, especially in relation to transcendence (Beckmann, 2001b). There have also been phenomenological, semiotic and other qualitative studies on the practice of BDSM (Bardzell, 2006; Prior and Williams, 2015; Stiles and Clark, 2011; Turley et al., 2011), the consent, ethics and beneficial outcomes from BDSM (Fulkerson, 2010; Nielsen, 2010; Powell, 2010) and the media representations of BDSM (Barrett, 2007; Beckmann, 2001b; Comella, 2013; Weiss, 2006a, 2009). Finally, criminological research has focused on how the BDSM subculture conceives disability (Beckmann, 2001b) and legal studies have scrutinised the laws connected to BDSM practices (Attwood and Walters, 2013; Bennett, 2013; Cowan, 2012; Khan, 2009).

In 2012, *Fifty Shades of Grey* became a very popular novel and in 2015 subsequently a Hollywood film. The purpose of this study is to analyse the view of BDSM that the story portrays, which provides us with a unique and valuable insight into how the BDSM community sees itself compared to how the BDSM community is seen by mainstream culture. As Bauer (2014) shows, there are no clear boundaries between BDSM practitioners and non-practitioners since the majority can potentially gain pleasure from BDSM practices. Moreover, the social context often determines whether people end up practising BDSM or not. Although there is a broad continuum in the level and form of self-identification with the subculture among the practitioners (Beckmann, 2009), we can still draw an indefinite line between those who live with the BDSM subculture and self-identify

themselves as being members of that subculture and those who do not. As Weiss (2011) defines it, the commitment to community and to BDSM as a form of social belonging is what differentiates the BDSM subculture members from non-members. Our aim in this study is therefore to help uncover how some subcultural members construct and negotiate the boundaries between BDSM subculture and those who do not belong to this subculture. Instead of applying a pre-defined category of the BDSM subculture members, we define the members from the insider point of view, which considers BDSM membership to be based on self-identification. We focus on the set of practices and the meanings attached to that subcultural self-identification.

Images associated with BDSM as a devoted practice (such as clothing styles, piercing, language expressions) are becoming more visible in the commercial field (Dymock, 2013; Langdridge, 2006; Martin, 2013; Wilkinson, 2009) and in some cases also more acceptable (Wilkinson, 2009) in mainstream society. The visibility is, however, connected to the damaging stereotypes about BDSM practitioners (Wilkinson, 2009). As Weiss puts it:

the visibility of BDSM is not directly connected to acceptance, tolerance and sexual freedom, because the acceptance through mainstream media is predicated on normalization and some modes of understanding on the contrary reinforce the division of sexuality into normal/abnormal, privileged/policed and healthy/pathological. (Weiss, 2006a: 4)

As Langdridge and Butt (2004) note, BDSM is becoming an increasingly popular and public sexual story. The difference between BDSM as a commercial field and BDSM as a devoted practice is getting blurred not only in the material sense, but also in the language used.

*Fifty Shades of Grey* is an erotic romance novel, written in 2011 by the British author EL James. It began as a blog for fans of the film *Twilight*, presenting stories similar to *Twilight*. Subsequently, it was self-published as an e-book. Sales of the book reached 125 million hard copies and e-books in 2015 (*The Guardian*, 2015), which makes it one of the best-selling books of all time. Since it became a very popular book about BDSM, and the story became even more known once it was made into a Hollywood film, it has had a significant influence on the mainstream view of BDSM subculture. It tells the story of a literature student, Ana, and a young business magnate, Christian Grey, who meet each other and fall in love. Ana dreams of a wonderful romantic relationship, but Christian does not want such a relationship; instead he wants her to be his slave. Christian considers himself to be an active BDSM dominant person and he treats Ana as a 'naturally' submissive girl. As Barker (2013) notes in her analysis of the concept of consent in the book, Christian insists on a kind of negotiation in the sexual side of the relationship, but his behaviour in the other parts of the relationship is far from consensual. Although Ana does not consider herself to be submissive, she is manipulated into engaging in BDSM practices. Ana is portrayed as a person

with no 'sexual agency', no ideas or desires of her own, and she appears to be passively receptive to the male. Thus, she is conforming to the highly problematic gender stereotype in which males are active and females are passive. After many twists in the plot and a few depictions of erotic scenes, Ana asks Christian to beat her as much as he likes so she can find out what a BDSM relationship is like. Christian does so and she leaves him crying.

In this article, we first outline our theoretical approach to culture, subcultures and BDSM. Subsequently, we discuss the methodology we use for the analysis of blogs about *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Finally, we provide the analysis itself and conclude.

## Theoretical approach

Contemporary BDSM subculture has a long history dating back to the leather subculture in the 1930s (Beckmann, 2009; Califa and Sweeney, 1996). However, the rise of the internet in the late 1980s became an important milestone in the evolution of the subculture, as it provided a platform in which people with the same interests can very easily communicate and spend time together in a virtual space (Weiss, 2011). We consider this virtual space to be extremely important for forming BDSM subculture that relies on meetings and subcultural events. Using a virtual ethnographic approach, this analysis focuses on the shared BDSM subcultural knowledge of what is 'theirs' and what is the mainstream view of them. Specifically, we reconstruct the collectively shared subcultural knowledge by using a virtual ethnography method that adapts in-person ethnographic research techniques to study the communities formed partially through computer-mediated communications. We undertake this by analysing the two most popular BDSM blogs and the comments therein. The blogs' text form makes the implicit subcultural knowledge become explicit, by openly confronting the subcultural members with the mainstream image of them and their relationships.

With the increasing commodification of subcultures and their gradual infiltration into the mainstream discourse, subcultural activists increasingly feel the need to define their position against the deployment, exploitation and misrepresentation of their subcultural symbols in the mainstream culture. The aim of this article is to show how some members of a particular subculture in a contemporary society define their position against their commercial image and how they maintain a subculture, despite its fragmentation.

This study uniquely combines two theories of the relationship between subcultural members and the mainstream. It starts with Thornton's theory that the members of the subculture need to define their position against the mainstream culture to protect the subculture from merging into mainstream and thereby becoming extinct (Gelder and Thornton, 1997). We combine Thornton with Becker's (1963) theory that members of the subculture group do not voluntarily define themselves against the mainstream; however, mainstream culture labels subcultural members as outsiders. There is a long history of specific scientific beliefs that have

shaped the social construction of sadism and masochism as a pathology and the sedimentation of such stereotypes into mainstream sentiments, which have also impacted practitioners in relation to their definitions of the self (Bauer, 2014; Beckmann, 2001a; Califa and Sweeney, 1996; Langdridge, 2006; Plante, 2006). Therefore, the power to keep the borderline between the subculture and mainstream culture lies in the hands of the dominant and relatively more powerful mainstream culture. We show that both of these theories are fruitful for studying subcultures; and, moreover, that they necessarily coexist in the same space and indispensably need each other to create a complex and exhaustive picture of the forces between mainstream culture and its subcultures in a society. We argue that there is no possibility of presenting a coherent picture of a subculture by using only one of these theories and omitting the other. In other words, following Thornton, the subculture group needs to define itself, but it does not define itself in a vacuum (Gelder and Thornton, 1997). It defines itself in a situation in which it feels pressure from the mainstream culture that, as Becker (1963) notes, is constantly trying to define the subculture in its mainstream terms. Thus, there is a constant interaction and tension between the subculture and mainstream culture.

We view the relationship between subcultures and mainstream based on a general conception of subcultures as well as on a specific conception of the BDSM subculture. Thornton defines a subculture as a group of people who share a common problem, interest or procedure, and who differentiate in a significant way from the members of other social groups (Gelder and Thornton, 1997). Subculture participants perceive that their values come into contrast with what is conventional and mainstream. They see members of mainstream society as a homogeneous mass, while they see themselves as a heterogeneous group, which unites diverse individuals with some shared interest or taste (Muggleton, 2000).

In developing an idea that a subculture must define its position vis-a-vis the mainstream culture, Thornton develops the useful notion of subcultural capital (Gelder and Thornton, 1997). She notes that subcultural capital is important for the subcultural group's ability to differentiate itself from mainstream culture. The subculture group must constantly work to avoid merging into the mass and it must actively define what is 'in' and 'out' in the subcultural scene. Thornton differentiates subculture from mainstream culture by the criterion of authenticity. She sees the real threat for underground subculture in its popularity and its transformation into becoming mainstream, which leads to a loss of authenticity (Gelder and Thornton, 1997). Thornton argues that subcultural capital is assessed by the degree of exclusivity. Subcultural styles and habits, therefore, must be protected from being continuously sought and appropriated by the mass (Gelder and Thornton, 1997). She develops Hebdige's concept of the commodification of subcultures, in which through commodification of its cultural forms, the subculture is deprived of its subversive potential and in its harmless and reified form then becomes geographically and socially widespread (Hebdige, 1979).

Muggleton and Wienzierl (2004a) analyse the mechanism of protecting the subcultural capital through discursive production and reproduction of the defining

lines that differentiate the underground taste from the mainstream. He describes the boundaries, which divide the subculture from the inauthentic and commercial, as porous and permeable, requiring constant supervision throughout the ongoing process of classification and reclassification of specific tastes as legitimate. According to Evans (1997), these processes of classification and reclassification are put into being, designed and replayed through everyday activities, clothing, worship and other cultural practices. In sum, our theoretical argument is that the members of the subculture are actively defining their position against the mainstream culture. Yet, at the same time the mainstream culture helps define the subcultural group; consequently, there is constant tension between the subculture group and mainstream culture. Becker (1963) claims that the members of the subculture are pushed out of mainstream society through a labelling process which mainstream society applies to them. The members of the subculture are, therefore, forced to constantly create boundaries between them and the mainstream by the outside mainstream culture. Our analysis is more suitable for analysing the first aspect; that is, the active defining of the subcultural position against the mainstream from its members.

Based on Becker's (1963) and Muggleton and Wienzierl's (2004a) insights, we developed a model of five different forces, which form the symbolic boundaries between the BDSM subculture and the mainstream culture. The relationship is always dialectical and fluid; therefore, our five points indicate this dialectical process. Subcultures need mainstream culture for their existence; subcultures cannot develop without a culture and culture cannot develop further without subcultures pushing it. First, subcultures try to separate themselves from the mainstream to maintain their authenticity and remain in existence (e.g. a T-shirt stating: 'I was into BDSM before *Fifty Shades of Grey*'). Second, at the same time, subcultures try to support a broader appeal of themselves to the mainstream to make them legally and sociably accepted (e.g. public BDSM events, shows, street celebrations and pride events). Third, the BDSM subculture actively tries to support a wider spread of its values to protect the BDSM newcomers from the danger of abuse from those outside of the subculture who pose as subcultural members (e.g. the regular subcultural events designed only for total BDSM beginners to teach them the complete basic principles of BDSM). Fourth, mainstream culture isolates the subculture by labelling it 'deviant' (e.g. the banning of *Fifty Shades of Grey* in public libraries in Florida). Fifth, at the same time, however, mainstream culture in capitalism and its consumerism commodifies the symbols of BDSM subculture by using them in different contexts inside of the mainstream culture and changing their meaning in doing so (e.g. the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy itself along with the deriving literature and merchandising that plays off the trilogy). Tsaros (2013) sees the main means of successful commodification of *Fifty Shades of Grey* in heteronormative notions of femininity and female sexual agency and also in a tendency to normatively limit the depictions of sadomasochistic desires. The mainstream culture commodifies BDSM in its representations without capturing the values of the BDSM scene such as consent, safety, the value of open negotiation and

communication, the use of safety-words and gestures, as well as the practice of checking-in with the bottoming person to find out whether they are all right. As Langdridge and Butt (2004) and Langdridge (2006) put it, consent is a core concept of the BDSM practitioner's self-understanding and is crucial for an activity to be defined as BDSM. These rules developed over time in the subculture to ensure ethical conduct (Bauer, 2014). This is necessary to protect the members against abusive behaviour (Nordling et al., 2000). These rules also protect BDSM practitioners against accusations of violence with its slogan 'Safe, sane, consensual' (Weiss, 2011).

## Method

This article uses the virtual ethnographic method for reconstructing the collectively shared subcultural knowledge, which we define in accordance with Kozinets (2006) as a qualitative and interpretative methodology that adapts the in-person ethnographic research techniques to study the communities formed partially through computer-mediated communications (for further details about virtual ethnography see Bowler, 2010; Dlouhá, 2012; García et al., 2009; Hine, 2000; Kozinets, 2009). For further details about in-person ethnographic research, see Claire, 2003; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Ellen, 1984; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Spradley, 1989). In our analysis, we used the only two blogs that contain chapter-by-chapter style comments on *Fifty Shades of Grey* (found on the first 20 pages of a Google search for 'bdsm blog 50 shades'). In these cases, the blogger writes a post about each chapter of the book before reading the next chapter, which provides a researcher with much richer data than a usual blog column about a whole book. The bloggers write the reviews mostly for readers belonging to BDSM subculture. They introduce the reviews with the words 'I read and review *Fifty Shades of Grey* so you don't have to.' and 'Sex. Feminism. BDSM. And some very, very naughty words.' Many of the comments from readers openly claim that they are engaged in BDSM. Consequently, even if we do not have a representative sample of all BDSM practitioners, by examining two popular blogs that discuss the book in more detail than other on-line sites, we gain insight to how at least a certain portion of the community perceives the book.

The first blog comes from Pervocracy (Pervocracy, 2013), who claims that she is 27 years old, living in Boston, graduated in film and rhetoric, is now studying nursing and is currently working in a hospital emergency room. BizzyBiz (Bizzybiz, 2012) is the author of the second blog. She states that she is 36 years old, was born in Chicago, is now living in England, graduated in gender and sexuality and is currently working in the field of mathematics. They do not openly define themselves in the blogs as dominant or submissive (or with any other BDSM term).

There is an explicit and implicit subcultural knowledge present in every subculture. The explicit subcultural knowledge is conveyed to members by the description in manuals on how to do BDSM correctly, in subcultural workshops and also in various regular thematic meetings for beginners and advanced (Newmahr, 2008;

Weiss, 2011). This form of transmission of knowledge is specific to contemporary BDSM subculture open to everyone interested in joining and actively educating its members (Bauer, 2014). The explicit knowledge has already been thoroughly scrutinised in previous research, whereas the implicit knowledge has not been studied extensively. We enrich the virtual ethnographic method with a documentary analysis, in which we conceptualise our analysis following Bohnsack (2014) as a reconstruction of the implicit knowledge that underlies everyday practice and gives an orientation to habitualised actions independent of individual intentions and motives. Therefore, this analytic approach focuses, in the complexity of the utterances of subculture activists, on the core of the implicit knowledge, which lies underneath their words and is shared by the whole subculture.

This implicit knowledge uncovered with the documentary method corresponds to part of Thornton's (1996) definition of subcultural capital as a way of displaying the subculture's dedication. As Maffesoli (1996) notes, the identities of individuals are fluid and contextual. The subcultural dedication displays itself through implicit knowledge when activists use temporary subcultural slang or when activists show knowledge of new subcultural techniques. The first part, according to Thornton (1996), is a material form of subcultural manifestations in visible appearance, clothes, hairstyle or collection of subculturally significant material objects. This implicit subcultural knowledge has to be used in particular established ways by the subculture to be effective for showing one's dedication. Thornton (1996) adds that using this knowledge must seem to be completely effortless when subcultural participants use it. For Thornton (1996), the act and way of using this part of the subcultural capital is the essential sign that differentiates those who are merely doing the same or similar activities from true subcultural members. It also determines the position of an individual within the subculture. Thus, this study focuses on uncovering this implicit knowledge.

## Results

BDSM practitioners in many cases see their subcultural identity as being central to their personal identities and sometimes also central in determining their lifestyle. Nevertheless, they still usually see it as something detached from their personal character traits. Although Beckmann's research (2009) shows that some of the practitioners are not committed to the subculture in the same way as the others and they do not see BDSM as central to their identity, other researchers such as Newmahr (2011) and Weiss (2011) confirm the devotion of the subcultural members to their subcultural identity. Subcultural members commonly use the argument that BDSM practitioners are just the same as non-BDSM practitioners in most of their personal aspects and they simply differ from other people in their BDSM interests. They see their BDSM identity as being stable and lifelong, but also as simply one part of their lives. According to the blogs, this contrasts with *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which depicts BDSM activists as having one-sided personalities, where their entire being is based on their BDSM identity.

Two types of mainstream reasoning of BDSM practitioners' preferences appear in the book *Fifty Shades of Grey*. One is based on events from their past (most commonly their unusual childhood, family upbringing or early sexual experiences). The second is based on the general characteristics of the mental state of a person (most commonly depression, self-hatred, being asocial or general weirdness). This stereotype of BDSM as a pathology has a lengthy history and continuous impact on the public image of the BDSM subculture. Though consensual sadomasochism was exempted from recent International Classification of Diseases ICD-11 (World Health Organization, 2018), the long-term stigmatisation in the medical discourse contributes to negative stereotypes in public discourse and in media (Beckmann, 2009). By contrast, the bloggers see personal BDSM interests as mostly being life-long, without any precise beginning. Moreover, subcultural biographical narratives usually claim that their interest in BDSM began early in childhood or early adolescence, though usually without an awareness of what it was at that time. *Fifty Shades*, by contrast, depicts the BDSM practitioners as having been abused in childhood, having had other problems with their childhood or as doing BDSM after having been violently forced into these practices by their partner.

Both of the bloggers argue against the view that BDSM behaviour comes from traumatic childhood experiences. In fact, they oppose the idea that there exists any causal explanation for why people practice BDSM. They also oppose the book's psychological view of BDSM practitioners as having an inner hatred towards themselves and a feeling of not deserving to accept love. They further criticise the view that self-hatred is a sign of BDSM practising. Their points fit in well with Baumeister's (1988) distinction between self-hatred and uncomfortably high self-awareness. Baumeister considers BDSM practices to be an escape from high self-awareness by the unavoidable focus on the immediate present and on bodily sensations, and by low-level awareness of one's self as an object. BizzyBiz argues that the book depicts BDSM as a kind of escape route, which provides the practitioners with an inner excuse for accepting loving feelings, which they otherwise cannot accept due to the constant inner hate. She depicts this as a stereotypical view of BDSM practitioners, and states that this view does not correspond with the actual experiences of the BDSM practitioners. Pervocracy articulates BDSM as a sexual preference of free choice and a source of amusement and a fully joyful mental and bodily experience:

I don't think we're meant to be totally repulsed by all those overheated descriptions of sweaty bondage sex. But I guess we're supposed to be, like, turned on by it but also know that it isn't right and mustn't go on? We're supposed to cluck our tongues reproachfully and feel bad for the poor girl ... If I'm going to enjoy BDSM, call me a pervert who's actually violating the status quo rather than sternly upholding it while still getting my rocks off, but I'd rather enjoy BDSM. (Pervocracy)

However, BizzyBiz does accept the notion in *Fifty Shades* that one often takes on a BDSM lifestyle as a consequence of being introduced to it. She describes BDSM as

something people gravitate towards during their lives ‘because they like it, not because someone fucked them up’ (BizzyBiz), and states that people would have the same character and desires even without the subcultural experience. Without a subcultural partner, BDSM would remain unrealised, locked in people’s imaginations. As BizzyBiz puts it:

[Christian] probably wouldn’t be any different sexually [if a previous girlfriend had not introduced him to BDSM]. [Christian] may have come to it later in life, or [Christian] may have gotten into a relationship with someone who wasn’t compatible in that way and it would have remained just a fantasy forever (many, many people are in exactly this situation), but nevertheless, the interest in bondage and domination was probably always lurking there somewhere.

Both Pervocracy and BizzyBiz see a significant difference between their view and the author’s depiction of consent to and rejection of practices and activities in BDSM relationships. Their view is backed up by scholars writing on the topic: thus, Bauer (2014) points out that the concept of consent is presented as being given in the BDSM subculture. Athanassoulis (2002) concludes in her study of BDSM consent that there has to be three conditions met for consent to be valid:

- first, the consent should represent the agent’s self-interest
- second, consent must be given freely
- third, consent must be given voluntarily and knowingly; the choice to consent should be under the agent’s control and the agent should understand what the consent is about.

Bauer (2014) problematises the idea of consent, stating that it varies in its degree of specificity; sometimes unspoken assumptions collide and it also has flexible boundaries. He proposes the term ‘working consent’ to distinguish consent as a dogma from consent based on personal integrity and respecting boundaries. Beckmann (2009) remarks that the media coverage of BDSM ignores the importance of negotiating consent. She stresses the open and communicative atmosphere of BDSM meetings, where personal agency, safety, holistic understanding of bodies and established patterns of negotiating all play important roles. Pervocracy makes a point that within the BDSM subculture, anytime someone is against a particular practice, others must accept this. She connects this point to safety issues in relationships. According to her, the practice of ignoring somebody’s opposition to a practice conforms to the non-subcultural depiction of a dominant. BizzyBiz goes even further with this argument when she describes ignoring somebody’s rejection as being an act of rape, without any links to BDSM subcultural practices:

Anyone who answers that [a rejection of a date] with ‘I took care of your little objection, now you must date me’ is someone you cannot trust to listen to ‘no’, and that is not hot and domly, it is fucking scary... Unfortunately, I think this

might be trying to show his domliness. I've heard people before claim that not taking no for an answer is very dominant. It's an attitude that scares the shit out of me. Someone who can't deal with not getting their way can't be a safe partner for anything really, but they especially can't be a safe BDSM partner. (BizzyBiz)

Such a representation of consent in BDSM is fundamentally problematic in terms of the normalisation of patriarchal violence and a representation of practitioners as people enjoying violence. One of the basic ways in which the book's view might be seen as significantly different from the subcultural view is the mutual position of the negotiation and the BDSM roles. In the book's depiction, the mutual negotiation of BDSM practices is already a part of the BDSM scene and the behaviour of the practitioners has already been negotiated inside their BDSM roles. The BDSM bloggers, by contrast, claim that the negotiation about mutual BDSM behaviour takes place while the participants are outside of their BDSM roles. Instead, they negotiate while they are within their everyday roles in a non-BDSM context.

Pervocracy states that the whole process of negotiating about BDSM roles in the book is depicted as a negotiation about the price when buying a car, in which the negotiations resemble a battleground where each side attempts to gain at the other's expense. In her view, the negotiating process within the BDSM subculture, by contrast, is rather a game in which both sides win and gain from their ability to develop mutually enjoyable activities. Thus, Pervocracy writes:

It's not 'negotiating' like you're buying a used car. You're not in an adversarial relationship trying to drive a hard bargain. In fact you're an abusive fuckwad if you drive a hard bargain ... The point of BDSM negotiation isn't to find a compromise between the dom's need to hurt and use and the submissive's sense of self-preservation. The point is to work out activities that will be enjoyable for both of them ... Yes, they [Christian and Ana] do a thing they call 'negotiation', but for god's sake. Maybe we need to change the name to 'collaborating on a mutual kink plan' or something. (Pervocracy)

According to the bloggers, within the BDSM scene consent is taken as an explicit expression of consent, in contrast to the book, which uses consent as either giving in to the requirements of the dominant during negotiation inside a field of power and inside of the BDSM roles or the state of not having objections against a dominant's decision. Entering a BDSM relationship is seen by the bloggers as a mutual and ongoing negotiation, which is supposed to be between people who are already informed about the subculture. In their view, introducing someone to a BDSM relationship without informing him or her properly about what the BDSM relationship is like, is highly unethical. Furthermore, a person who is not well-informed about BDSM subculture cannot give full conscious consent to enter the subculture.

According to some studies, BDSM does not comprise the pure inner essence of one's personality and is rather performative, make-believe or theatre. Some authors

such as Bauer (2014) go so far as to consider BDSM to be a social construction over a common majority population. Stear (2009) considers BDSM to be a make-believe game; an objective fictional realm created by properties combined with principles of generation. Weiss (2011) considers BDSM to be a performative act and explains that 'becoming a BDSM practitioner, even if imagined to spring from a core or essential desire, requires self-mastery and self-knowledge that is bound to community rules, techniques, and perspectives' (2011: 29). Similarly, Foucault (1990: 27) claims that 'one performs on oneself, not only in order to bring one's conduct into compliance with a given rule, but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one's behaviour'. According to Beckmann (2009), the BDSM rejects an abstract morality. A person is able to respectfully deal with others only when he or she has established a profound knowledge and care of self (Beckmann, 2009). This care of the self is a reflexive attitude, which is a base for personal (contextual and relational) ethics and leads to self-mastery, self-sufficiency and happiness (Beckmann, 2009). Weiss (2011) adds that this mastering of knowledge differentiates the core members of the subculture (lifestyle, heavy, experienced practitioners) from the non-members (bedroom, unsafe, newbie practitioners). Taylor (1997), Taylor and Ussher (2001) and Beckmann (2009) argue that BDSM has different meanings for different practitioners. It can mean dissidence against the hegemonic patriarchal heterosexuality, plain pleasure and fun; an escapism from reality; a learned behaviour; an intrapsychic interest; a pathology; an inexplicable behaviour; or a transcendence to spiritual experiences (Taylor, 1997; Taylor and Ussher, 2001). BDSM enables the construction of different realities based on intentionality without any biological, psychological or sociological determinants (Beckmann, 2009). Beckmann (2009) associates various types of this transcendence with spiritual experiences. She notes that some scholars have perceived BDSM as an institutionalised religion (with the goal of giving up one's will and the bodily practices leading to a feeling of identity with something). Others have seen it as providing the context of ritual behaviour of particular non-modern cultures (with the goal of breaking through the sensory routine, which is achieved through extreme body practices such as torture, fasting or drugs). Yet another view is to see BDSM as a form of mysticism (with the quest for truth and reality that goes beyond merely sensory or intellectual spheres, and is achieved through the spontaneous flash of absolute power or ecstasy). A fourth approach has been to analyse BDSM in the context of mainstream societal values – with the goal of transcendence of these values and perceiving BDSM subculture as a liminal space that enables transgression (Beckmann, 2009). Regardless of the practitioner's personal reasoning, the state apparatus attempts to regulate the sexual expression of the state citizens in a forceful way (Athanasoulis, 2002; Langdridge, 2006) through its legal and healthcare system, symbolically owning the bodies of its citizens and forcing them to behave in a way dictated by the state (Taylor, 1997). Depending on the level of personal commitment, which may vary (Beckmann, 2009), the practitioners of stigmatised sexualities, therefore, try to justify their conduct in order to have a political argument for the state.

The justification of BDSM behaviour could sometimes lie in the argument that BDSM behaviour is natural and the practitioners cannot change their essence (Plante, 2006).

According to the bloggers, *Fifty Shades* depicts domination as an attribute which is irrepressible and BDSM as being natural in all kinds of situations. The bloggers, by contrast, state that those in dominant roles keep their dominance under their self-control. The BDSM subculture develops norms for the behaviour of its members and rules for playing a submissive or dominant position. The basic, 'golden' rule according to Beckmann (2009) is the necessity of trying a particular practice in the submissive role first, so that one is able to perform it safely later in a dominant role. The dominant in a scene must be extremely sensitive and experienced to be able to distinguish between the submissive's feeling of being hurt and feeling of painful pleasure (Beckmann, 2009). The internalisation of such rules demonstrates the dedication of the members to the subculture. According to Beckmann (2009), the negotiation should include talking about sex history, medical problems, pain tolerance, limits, prior experience with BDSM, a list of practices which they want to do, might do or would not like to do, safewords, fantasies and a reason for playing a particular scene. Furthermore, the bloggers point out that within the BDSM subculture, negotiation and consent must take place before any kind of BDSM activity, that is, not only before activities that contain obvious pain, sexual undertones or sex, but also before actions that deal with more subtle and less recognisable activities regarding domination and submission of people used during usual conversation. As Pervocracy writes:

Also, there goes 'but not until we negotiate and you consent', for the umpteenth time. I guess it doesn't seem [in the book] like such a big deal [the fact that they were doing the BDSM activities before negotiating about them] because it's not a sexual or painful thing, but this is still domination. I think E.L. James is trying to do a 'but it's just a part of who he is and he can't turn it off' thing here, but fuck that. He can fucking control himself for the length of a conversation, and if he can't, he has no business in any kind of relationship, much less a D/s relationship. (Pervocracy)

According to the bloggers, obedient behaviour in an everyday situation, described in the book as 'naturally born submissive', is not an expression of a BDSM submissive person. The bloggers deny any link between people's behaviour in everyday life and their behaviour during BDSM scenes. They call Ana's behaviour 'topping from the bottom', which they explain is a subcultural term for the case in which a submissive tries to change the decision of a dominant to the submissive's benefit or comfort. They argue that a true submissive would not act in such a manner. BizzyBiz writes:

[Ana] starts negotiating – she'll let him [Christian] spank her if he tells her more about himself ... She is trying to manipulate him, and it's working. In D/s this is called 'topping from the bottom' ... and it is heavily frowned upon. She's as bad as sub as he

is a Dom ... if Christian were the Dominant the author attempted to portray him as earlier in the book, he would have called her on this immediately. Instead he's like Here, enjoy these Ben Wa balls [Venus balls] while I spank you nicely. (BizzyBiz)

## Conclusion

*Fifty Shades of Grey* presents BDSM as a central aspect of a person's personality and character. According to the bloggers, though, the subcultural discourse sees BDSM identity as being central to personal identities and central to one's lifestyle but detached from personal character traits. In the subcultural discourse, one's BDSM identity is considered to be lifelong and substantially consistent over time. The bloggers claim that the mainstream discourse wrongly places BDSM practitioners into two categories: those who become practitioners because of previous experiences and those who become practitioners for psychological reasons. The members of the subculture not only oppose both of those claims, they even deny that there are any reasons at all for people to become interested in BDSM. The book depicts BDSM activities as something that, by nature, are unwanted and forced experiences. In contrast, the subcultural discourse sees BDSM as something people gravitate towards during their life. In their view, one usually joins the BDSM scene after voluntarily being introduced to BDSM practices together with an inexperienced partner, or by an experienced partner.

The other central theme concerns personal and subcultural boundaries. Negotiation is the main instrument for becoming aware of personal boundaries. In the book's depiction, the negotiation between the dominant and submissive person takes place already inside of the BDSM roles; however, in the subcultural conception, the negotiation takes place outside of each person's BDSM role. The meaning that is attached to the activity of negotiation also differs in the book and in the subcultural view. According to the bloggers, the book depicts negotiation as an activity in which both negotiating sides attempt to reach a compromise between the practices one person enjoys and the practices the other enjoys. Thus, each side tries to gain some advantage from the discussion. In the subcultural view, by contrast, negotiation entails finding similar enjoyable practices for both sides. According to Plummer (1999), contemporary sexual ethics should be bound to context, meaning, consent, diversity, respect and responsibility. He builds on Foucault, who postulated the need for a new form of general ethics, which would centre around the relationship to the self in interrelation to others (Foucault in Beckmann, 2009). Those, who limit the freedom of other people, are free individuals who have instruments for governing others (Beckmann, 2009). As Bauman puts it, the ethical paradox of the postmodern world is the fullness of moral choice for the agents, but lack of universal guidance for it (Bauman in Beckmann, 2009).

Regarding subcultural boundaries, we show that the boundaries between the subculture and culture are continuously constructed and disassembled dialectically

by both sides. We develop our dialectical approach by combining Thornton's view of subcultural members with Becker's (1963) view of mainstream culture. Thornton notes that subcultures strive to be protected from merging into the mainstream by defining their position against the mainstream culture (Gelder and Thornton, 1997). Meanwhile, Becker (1963) argues that mainstream culture labels subcultural members as outsiders. Deviance can be, according to Becker, defined in four ways: first as a plain statistical deviation; second as an inner pathology or product of mental disease in a medical discourse; third as a plain failure to obey particular group rules; fourth as an successful act of labelling the people who break the rules as deviant and such behaviour as deviant (Becker, 1963). A mainstream stereotype uses a specific belief about the pathology of sadism and masochism, which is equivalent to one of Becker's definitions of deviance: an inner pathology or product of mental disease in a medical discourse. This widespread belief about the pathology forms the BDSM practitioners' relationship to their self. Our article shows that these two boundary-creating forces combine with other forces, which try to disassemble such boundaries.

Five different forces shape the symbolic boundaries between the subculture and the mainstream, as the subculture participants must both try to create their own boundaries vis-a-vis the mainstream culture and simultaneously deal with how the mainstream culture defines them. First, the subculture tries to separate itself from the mainstream to maintain its authenticity and its existence. Thus, the BDSM bloggers try to show that *Fifty Shades* does not give an authentic portrayal of BDSM relationships. This supports Becker's (1963) claim that those engaged in behaviour that the mainstream defines as being 'deviant' identify themselves with the behaviour which society deems to be deviant. As one respondent in Bauer's study puts it, 'Being into SM, it's so much more exciting and so much more sexually arousing because it's actually sort of a forbidden fruit you're touching' (2014: 40). Plante (2006) shows that the need for a group to differentiate itself from the mainstream works also inside the BDSM subculture with its subparts of specific groups, such as the spanking community differing itself from other types of BDSM communities.

Second, the subculture tries to support a broader appeal of itself to the mainstream to make it legally and sociably accepted; consequently, the bloggers argue that they are normal people, who are capable of accepting love. This builds on the history of BDSM as being considered pathological, which remains in the mainstream stereotypes about the subculture. Nevertheless, Weeks and Holland (1996) claim that the scientific discourses on pathological behaviour have opened the debate about specific sexual interests and, consequently, have enabled greater agency in the sexual sphere. Plummer (1999) sees a solution to this dilemma of gaining more freedom while still being labelled 'pathological' in the modern politics of lifestyle ethics. The discourses on lifestyle ethics could be used to talk through differences, seek out commonalities and lead to the establishment of limited sets of authoritative agreements that could enable people to make their own choices. These two forces support Langdridge and Butt's (2004) claim that

there are two different discourses within BDSM communities: one that is about transgressing norms and positioning BDSM as an oppositional identity to mainstream sexuality; and one that seeks inclusion within sexual citizenship. Bauer (2014) agrees about the desire to gain sexual citizenship, stating that the main focus of BDSM activism in the last decade has been the depathologisation of consensual sexual practices and the fight against the legal prosecution of BDSM practitioners. Nevertheless, Bauer (2014) also suggests that complete depathologisation could lower the appeal of BDSM for its practitioners, because part of the thrill might come from the fact that they act in a 'forbidden' way. This might relate also to the depathologisation leading to deeper utter commodification and corporate exploitation of BDSM. However, respondents from Beckmann's London BDSM scene research (2009) state that society considers contemporary BDSM practices to be less deviant than it did in the past. Nevertheless, they admit they still get a thrill from participating in the contemporary scene. The commodification of this subculture has impacted the ways in which the practitioners experience and interpret their BDSM bodily practices (Beckmann, 2009). According to Sawicki (Sawicki in Beckmann, 2009), in contrast to subcultural BDSM, the commodification of BDSM has made it reductionistic and decontextualised. Saner (2008), however, sees positive effects of commodification in that it has led to greater access to tools, outfits and clubs.

Third, the subculture actively tries to spread its values to protect its members from abuse. Hence the bloggers emphasise the need for having the negotiations take place outside of the BDSM relationship, when practitioners are in their everyday roles.

Fourth, mainstream culture pushes the subculture out by discursively labelling the subculture as deviant. In this context, the bloggers claim that *Fifty Shades* portrays BDSM in a manner that aims to repulse the readers rather than make them understand how BDSM is practiced in reality. As *Fifty Shades of Grey* has become mainstream reading, it might be hard to see how mainstream society could still perceive BDSM practices as being partly deviant and 'spicy', rather than as a fully common practice. BDSM has been historically labelled as being deviant and this label has still not fully disappeared. BDSM practices are still on the border of mainstream society and not at the core of it. Even though the commodified picture of BDSM is omnipresent in today's western mainstream culture, the actual practice of BDSM with the subcultural meaning attached to it remains a privilege of small groups of people who actively participate in the BDSM subculture. Saner (2008) postulates, that the commodification of this subculture should not be interpreted as representing a greater understanding or openness for BDSM subcultural practices. She sees the commodified BDSM as being mostly genital focused, while subcultural BDSM is not necessarily genital focused (Saner 2008).

Finally, at the same time, the mainstream commodifies the subcultural values and symbols, which can be seen by the great commercial success of both the book and film.

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