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## Doing Kink vs. Being Kinky: A Systematic Scoping Review of the Literature on BDSM Behavior, Orientation, and Identity

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**Doing Kink vs. Being Kinky: A Systematic Scoping Review of the Literature on BDSM  
Behavior, Orientation, and Identity**

by

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Psychology  
in partial fulfillment to the requirements for the degree of

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## Dedication

*This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Steven Russell, and my children John and Skyler, who have been wildly supportive every single step of the way. Thank you to my parents, Bruce and Debbie Warnick, my partners Lexie Grey and Dr. Liz Powell, and some of my dearest friends Sadie Whitney, Kelsey Williams, Nicole Boutros, Ariel Zeig, Shakun Sethi, Laura Hilton, Dr. Timothy Hilton, and Cheryl Bowen - who was there from day one. I would also like to extend a special thanks to Aaron Leedy, my cousin, academic advisor, and one of my best friends, for his support in all things. I am honored to be surrounded by the love and support of some truly remarkable humans.*

*Thank you for your belief in me.*

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### Abstract

*Objective:* This systematic scoping review examines the existing literature on bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism (BDSM, i.e., kink) as it relates to three core dimensions of sexuality: behavior, orientation, and identity. The main sexuality framework I used for defining these dimensions is Sexual Configurations Theory (van Anders, 2015). This search is guided by two research questions. 1) Are there empirical differences between individuals who simply consider BDSM to be something they do (i.e., behavior only) and individuals who consider BDSM to be part of who they are (i.e., kink-identified)? 2) Are there any existing, psychometrically validated, quantitative measures to assess BDSM as an identity component? I hypothesized that substantial overlap would exist between use of language across the three dimensions in question, and that a model where some overlap in these distinct but interrelated dimensions would be evident.

*Method:* I conducted a search using various combinations of the terms *BDSM*, *kink*, *identity*, *behavior*, and *orientation*; 60 articles were identified for coding. I then coded articles into one or more of the following categories: behavior, orientation, and identity, using the definition and language of these dimensions as provided by van Anders' (2015) Sexual Configurations Theory.

*Results:* My hypothesis was confirmed. Substantial overlap did exist in language reflecting all three dimensions throughout the literature, both from researchers and their participants (in most cases, members of the BDSM/kink community and/or BDSM/kink practitioners), these terms being rarely operationally defined and frequently conflated. Six main themes emerged from this scoping review across the three dimensions: 1) BDSM behavior heavily used as a tool for assessing some form of engagement with BDSM, 2) BDSM was positioned as a type of serious leisure and/or adult play, 3) BDSM fantasy as a type of orientation to BDSM, 4) BDSM was

positioned as a tool for myriad types of exploration, 5) BDSM role identification was positioned as a cornerstone of BDSM identity development, and 6) BDSM community engagement as important to BDSM identity development. Additionally, empirical assessment of BDSM identity relies heavily on measures created on a case-by-case basis, as no psychometrically validated assessment of BDSM identity exists.

*Conclusion:* Human sexuality is nuanced and complex. For those who are drawn to and/or practice BDSM/kink, some are drawn to it as a skills-based, pleasure-based, intimacy building, and/or leisure activity, but do not identify with it; some fantasize about it but do not practice it often or ever; and some find it to be an important and inseparable part of their whole sexual identity akin to their sexual orientation and gender identity. Important differences exist between these groups (e.g., ten Brink et al., 2021), and research on BDSM would benefit greatly from further investigation of these constructs.

## **Doing Kink vs Being Kinky: A Systematic Scoping review of the Literature on BDSM Behavior, Orientation, and Identity**

Human sexuality is fluid, complex, and challenging to conceptualize (Gemberling et al., 2015; van Anders, 2015). Traditionally, sexuality has been broken down into categories that represent some combination of sexual attraction, sexual orientation, gender identity, biological sex, and sexual behavior. Researchers have studied each of these categories to various degrees but generally fail to comprehensively represent the complex and nuanced nature of the whole sexual self. One of the ways that research on sexuality and sexual orientation is limited is that it doesn't correlate well with the lived experiences of real people (Sprott & Berkey, 2015; van Anders, 2015). For example, sexual orientation language has traditionally been framed in terms of attraction to gender (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, 1948; Gemberling et al., 2015), but this categorization does not capture the complexity of attraction or of gender; it also fails to recognize agender and asexual identities in meaningful ways (van Anders, 2015).

In Sexual Configurations Theory, van Anders (2015) presents an argument to go beyond overly simplistic categorizations in favor of a more complicated and more accurate model of sexuality. van Anders (2015) lays out a nuanced and complex version of the whole sexual self that includes myriad "parameters" (p. 1189) that intersect and combine to form what she calls Sexual Configurations.

Sexual Configurations Theory (van Anders, 2015) is the sexuality model which guides my systematic scoping review (PRISMA-ScR; Tricco et al., 2018) of the literature on BDSM/kink. Sexual Configurations Theory (2015) is unique from other sexuality models in many ways, including its incorporation of BDSM/kink as a parameter of sexuality that intersects with and informs other parameters like gender, sexual orientation, and partner number (Sprott &

Berkey, 2015). I intend to explore the existing literature on BDSM based on the sexuality dimensions<sup>1</sup> identity, orientation, and status (which I will call *behavior* for the remainder of the paper, as *status* describes behavior and activity, and behavior is the language most commonly used by researchers and educators) laid out in Sexual Configurations Theory (van Anders, 2015; p. 1178, Table 1).

I chose these dimensions because “attending to sexual orientation, sexual identity, and sexual behavior as related but distinct phenomena could be crucial to scientific theories of sexualities and also to making meaning of sexual lives” (van Anders, 2015; p. 1178). This paper is intended to be a scoping review of the evidence of the intersectionality of these dimensions with BDSM, an area which has previously been underexplored in the research (Gemberling et al., 2015). Reviewing if and how researchers conceptualize BDSM/kink in these ways offers empirical insight into the role BDSM/kink plays in the sexualities of those who engage in it, are oriented towards it, and/or identify with it.

### **Sexual Behavior**

Sexual behavior has frequently been studied and defined from a public health viewpoint as any behaviors that carry some sexual health risk (i.e., sexually transmitted infections, bodily harm, pregnancy) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). More accurately, however, sexual behavior refers to any activities that people engage in that they consider sexual and/or leads to sexual arousal (see Georgiadis & Kringelbach, 2012). This could be behavior that is interpreted as sexual cue(s) and/or behavior that initiates the sexual response cycle (Basson, 2000; Georgiadis & Kringelbach, 2012). A broader view of sexual behavior helps us understand

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<sup>1</sup>“Sexuality dimensions” is my language and was not the title of the table in van Anders’ (2015) original paper.

the nature of sexual desire and arousal, is more inclusive to non-heteronormative and non-cisnormative individuals and provides a framework for conceptualizing the way individuals truly engage with themselves and each other sexually. Sexual behavior is an important part of how we explore pleasure, intimacy, and understand our sexual selves. People use sexual behavior as a form of leisure and adult play (Attwood & Smith, 2015; Berdychevsky et al., 2013; Berdychevsky & Nimrod, 2017; Weiss, 2006) . Sexual behavior is also a tool for exploring other parts of self and sexuality like fantasy, attraction, gender, and identity (Barsigian et al., 2020; Bauer, 2018; Jolene Sloan, 2015; Kimberly et al., 2018; Turley et al., 2017); all of which supports my proposed model where overlap exists between orientation, identity, and behavior.

Sexual behavior is also one important dimension to understanding BDSM as a part of practitioners' sexualities. Weiss (2011) referred to BDSM as a "sexuality organized around practices" (p. 11). BDSM encompasses myriad activities, many of which are intimate, but not inherently sexual (Jolene Sloan, 2015; Turley et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2016). For many practitioners, however, it does have a sexual component whether that be to evoke eroticism, ignite sexual arousal, or to fully engage with their partners in a sexually explicit way (Turley et al., 2017). What makes BDSM such an interesting and complicated phenomenon to study is the vast, diverse, subjective (Turley et al., 2017, 2018), world of behaviors that could be considered kinky and the inability of both researchers and communities to reach consensus which behaviors precisely do or do not qualify as kinky (Rehor, 2015). Generally, the same way a behavior is sexual if the parties involved consider it to be sexual, a behavior is kinky if the parties involved both consider it to be kinky (Turley et al., 2018; Weinberg et al., 1984; Wright, 2006). There are, however, some activities that tend to be commonly associated with BDSM, such as bondage, erotic humiliation, spanking and other impact play, and frequently those are used by researchers

to assess individual involvement in BDSM (Labrecque et al., 2021; Rehor, 2015; Turley et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2016). Researchers who wish to quantitatively study some element of BDSM and/or BDSM practitioners will often give participants a list of these kinky behaviors and ask them to identify which behaviors they engage in and/or have preference for. The more behaviors indicated, the “kinkier” a participant is and/or the more they are measured to be “kink-oriented”.

### **Sexual Orientation**

Sexual orientation is a facet of sexuality that typically refers to sexual (and sometimes to romantic and affectional) attraction based on gender (Dillon et al., 2011) or sex (as these are distinct but related – and frequently conflated – constructs) (van Anders, 2015). More specifically, sexual orientation is framed in terms of the gender of person A and the gender of the target of their attraction, or person B (Gemberling et al., 2015; van Anders, 2015). For example, if person A is a woman and is primarily attracted to other women, she would probably describe her sexual orientation as “gay” or “lesbian”. Sexual orientation is innate, and while it can change throughout lifespan development, it cannot be changed by those outside the individual or by sheer force of will (Bradshaw et al., 2015; Maccio, 2011; van Anders, 2015). Sexual orientation is, arguably, one of the most extensively studied aspects of sexual identity, particularly in relation to lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and other identities (LBGQ+). Despite such narrow parameters, sexual orientation language is frequently the foundational language we use both scientifically and socially to talk about sexuality. Such heavy reliance on sexual orientation to study and discuss sexuality and sexual identity has been significantly criticized due to lack of nuance, over-emphasis on dyadic sexuality (which minimizes or ignores singular sexuality, romanticism, and eroticism), too-static application, and failure to accurately map on to the lived

experiences of real people (van Anders, 2015). Ultimately, the word “orientation” can be applied dynamically and refers to interests, approaches, attractions, fantasies, and preferences (van Anders, 2015); Sexual Configurations Theory uses it with those meanings intended. Sexual orientation is also sometimes used as an all-inclusive term to describe sexual behavior, identity, and itself (van Anders, 2015). Sexual Configurations Theory acknowledges this definition, as well.

Applying a broader definition to the concept of sexual orientation, some have argued that orientation can (and perhaps should) cover additional sexualities, BDSM/kink among them (Bezreh et al., 2012; Gemberling et al., 2015; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018). Researchers and community members alike do refer to some practitioners as “kink-oriented;” however, they do so without elaborating on what that specifically entails. “Kink-oriented” as it’s applied in research could mean participation in or association with kink, it could reflect kink fantasies or preferences, and/or it could be used interchangeably with “kink-identified” to reflect some sexual identity component. It has been used to describe members of kink communities and individuals engaging in kink behaviors. My intent with this review is to search for patterns in the use of this language to determine if more specific meaning could be applied, and/or if further research is called for.

### **Sexual Identity**

Identity is another way to talk about varying aspects of the self. The self is the part of individuals that integrates their internal sense of who they are with the social groups to which they belong (Baumeister, 2010), as well as how they perceive those groups and are perceived by them. Put simply, identity is shaped and given meaning by social roles and messages people receive throughout their lifetimes and the ways in which, and extent to which, they internalize or

reject that social messaging (Ryan & Deci, 2014). Sexual identity is one's sense of their sexual self. Researchers "have argued that sexual identity would be more reliably assessed, and validly represented, if it were disentangled from sexual orientation" (Dillon et al., 2011, p. 652). Sexual orientation identity refers to the ways that an individual conceptualizes and internalizes their sense of their sexual orientation (Dillon et al., 2011). Like other forms of identity, sexual orientation identity can be informed by, understood, accessed, and expressed through individual friendship and romantic relationships, community associations, and social supports (Dillon et al., 2011; van Anders, 2015). As previously noted, sexual orientation offers limited information about a person's sexual self, and sexual orientation identity is just one of the many components of an individual's sexual identity as a whole. Sexual identity also includes and is shaped by myriad other factors such as behaviors, preferences, emotional and intimate relationships, attachments, partner(s) and partner number, models of sexual expression, individual sex and gender, labels, politics, communities, and social affiliations (Dillon et al., 2011; van Anders, 2015). Sexual Configurations Theory (van Anders, 2015) is interested in identity from a sociological perspective (e.g., group membership, community affiliation, identity labels, and positioning). The communities that individuals belong to play large and important roles in personal identity development throughout their lifespan. Belonging to a community centralized around an identity component helps validate and strengthen one's internal sense of self and one's group sense of belonging as they relate to that identity (see Zambelli, 2017). The scripts provided by the group offer important information about the meaning of associated identities and the language used to talk about them. Individuals learn the language of their communities and make decisions about how to apply that language to themselves. Some individuals are able to find appropriate ways to express their identities through the labels provided by their

communities, and others simply choose from the language that is available to them in the absence of more appropriate or specific alternatives (van Anders, 2015).

Another important part of understanding sexual identity is understanding sexual identity development. Dillon and colleagues (2011) summarize the Fassinger et al. (Fassinger & Miller, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996) models of sexual identity development, based on gay and lesbian identity development, as containing four phases: awareness, exploration, deepening/commitment, and internalization/synthesis. These stages describe the process of one learning/becoming aware of something different about themselves, discovering others like them and joining community, exploring alone and within the community, and eventually internalizing this understanding and integrating their identity into their larger sense of self. These stages could occur one after the other, simultaneously, or in another order entirely. Though these models are limited by their initial application to (and measurement within) gay and lesbian communities (Dillon et al., 2011), this model has been applied and adapted to heterosexual individuals (Worthington et al., 2002) and other sexual minority groups such as gay men, and does coincide with patterns reflected in research on the experiences of members of BDSM/kink communities (e.g., Carlström, 2019; Hughes & Hammack, 2019; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018; Zambelli, 2017).

The Worthington et al. (2002) heterosexual model includes six dimensions of sexual identity. Two of these six important dimensions that stand out, especially when considering a sexual identity development model as applied to BDSM identity, are preferred sexual activities and preferred mode of sexual expression. Aside from asking for self-identification (e.g., Fanghanel, 2020; Monteiro Pascoal et al., 2015), some of the most frequently used tools for assessing BDSM identity are behavior (i.e., activities; see “Behavior”) and role identification (i.e., preferred mode of expression) (e.g., Holvoet et al., 2017). BDSM is characterized by power

exchange dynamics at the interaction (i.e., scene) level and at relationship and group levels. This requires an exchange of power between participants. The roles commonly adopted by kink-identified individuals are dominant, submissive, switch, top, bottom, and/or vers (i.e., versatile). When studying BDSM, in addition to (or instead of) asking about behavior experiences (e.g., Holvoet et al., 2017; Monteiro Pascoal et al., 2015; Rehor, 2015), researchers will sometimes ask about BDSM role identification (e.g., Erickson et al., 2021; Rogak & Connor, 2018; Vilkin & Sprott, 2021). Participants will either be asked to self-identify with a role or to choose from a list provided to them. Not all BDSM practitioners identify with one of these roles. At the group level, these roles play an important part in how BDSM interactions, relationships, and communities are organized. At the individual level, these roles play an important part in how BDSM is internalized and integrated into one's identification with BDSM. These elements, along with the impact of community affiliation (Zambelli, 2017), work together at various levels to shape and inform BDSM identity.

## **BDSM**

BDSM is an initialism combining three other initialisms: bondage and discipline (B&D), dominance and submission (D/s), and sadism and masochism (S&M or SM). BDSM represents a set of consensual, sometimes-sexual behaviors, the community of people who practice these behaviors, and for some, a type of sexual orientation or component of their identity (Bezreh et al., 2012; Gemberling et al., 2015; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018). It is also sometimes more broadly called “kink” by practitioners, who may refer to themselves as “kinky” (Bezreh et al., 2012).

Weinberg, Williams, and Moser (1984) detail five features that characterize BDSM and distinguish it from non-BDSM (“vanilla”) sexual activity and relationships. First, a pre-negotiated exchange of power between two or more participants who are either *dominant* or

*submissive* takes place – although some practitioners *switch*, which means they can choose to be either dominant or submissive, depending on the situation (Bezreh et al., 2012; Hébert & Weaver, 2014; Wright, 2006). This power exchange is inherent in all BDSM sexual and non-sexual encounters and defines the roles and actions of the participants in each situation.

The second feature is role play (Baumeister, 1997; Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Moser & Levitt, 1987; Weinberg et al., 1984; Weinberg, 1987). Whether one has chosen to be dominant or submissive in a BDSM encounter determines what role (e.g., master, top, slave, bottom) they will play in the exchange (often referred to as a “scene”) (Hébert & Weaver, 2014; Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Weinberg et al., 1984). It is role play in that the dominant partner is the one who appears to have all the power, while the submissive partner appears to have given up their power, however this is all heavily negotiated in advance and each member of the exchange can stop what’s occurring at any time. Dominance and submission are roles being played when, in actuality, each individual retains their agency at all times.

The third feature is characterized by consent. Credos such as “Safe, Sane, Consensual (SSC)”, “Risk Aware Consensual Kink (RACK)”, and “Caring, Communication, Consent, and Caution (4C’s)” are guiding principles in BDSM/kink negotiation (Bezreh et al., 2012; Hébert & Weaver, 2014; Weinberg, 2006 ; Williams et al., 2014). BDSM behavior is often marked by exaggerated, intense sensory experiences, potentially involving pain and emotional degradation, often for the purpose of sexual arousal (Jozifkova, 2013; Weinberg et al., 1984). However, the community makes an important distinction between actual violence or abuse and the pretend violence that BDSM practitioners engage in (Weinberg, 1987; Wright, 2006). BDSM scenes are pre-negotiated and before beginning, all parties involved agree upon desires, fantasies, boundaries and “safe words” that are used to stop play should any participant become

uncomfortable (Weinberg, 2006). The presence of, and desire for, consent is also one of two major factors differentiating BDSM from a paraphilic disorder (the other being intense psychological distress) in the DSM-5 (American Psychological Association - APA, 2013).

Fourth, BDSM often has a sexual component, however not all BDSM encounters are inherently sexual (Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006; Jolene Sloan, 2015; Weinberg et al., 1984). BDSM encounters are typically incredibly intimate, even if only during the scene, requiring clear communication and the establishment of trust on the part of all players involved.

Finally, BDSM is characterized by mutual definition and satisfaction –all involved parties define the behavior as BDSM and/or kinky in nature, have agreed to the terms of the scene, feel safe in their surroundings, and satisfaction of all involved is a priority (Weinberg et al., 1984; Wright, 2006). All five characteristics are distinguishing features of BDSM activity and the BDSM community, however not all five are necessary for any single BDSM scene or relationship (Hébert & Weaver, 2014; Weinberg et al., 1984).

### **Doing Kink or Being Kinky**

#### ***Doing Kink: Behavior and Role Playing***

It is essential to note that despite many overarching characteristics, there is no one-size-fits-all way to practice BDSM (Bezreh et al., 2012; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006; ten Brink et al., 2021). Importantly, parties self-identify as kink-identified or kink-oriented or self-identify their behavior as kinky (e.g., Moser & Levitt, 1987). Within the kink community there is a broad spectrum of behavior and while some participants recognize their involvement in BDSM as part of their identity and sexual orientation – something they “are”, others view BDSM as simply one

facet of their sexual activity – something they “do” (Bezreh et al., 2012; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006).

Some examples of BDSM activity include behaviors that are traditionally not associated with sexual activity or intimate relationships such as bondage, torture, spanking, humiliation, and most prolifically, role play (Bezreh et al., 2012; Jozifkova, 2013; Wright, 2006). As mentioned above, kink behavior is characterized by role playing in which one partner is dominant and the other is submissive, and these role identities determine the nature of the behavior each partner will engage in. The dominant partner is sometimes (but not always) a sadist, meaning they find pleasure in the pain or humiliation of consenting others, and possess what appears to be control of the scene. The submissive partner is sometimes (but not always) a masochist, meaning they find pleasure receiving pain or humiliation, and have what appears to be no power at all in the scene, though this is an act that has been negotiated ahead of time (Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Weinberg et al., 1984).

BDSM activity is pre-negotiated and based on fantasy, so it is important for partners to be good at playing their roles to allow both partners to successfully immerse themselves in the scene (Turley, 2016). It is, arguably, especially important for the dominant partner to excel at communication, role playing, and attending to social cues. Once a scene is negotiated and play begins, it is imperative that the dominant partner be attentive to verbal and non-verbal cues offered by the submissive partner that might indicate whether the scene is progressing as intended, whether the submissive is enjoying themselves or, most importantly, whether the limitations and boundaries of the submissive are being approached or potentially violated (Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006; Weinberg et al., 1984). In situations where a submissive partner has been restrained and/or their ability to speak is compromised, it can be

even more important that the dominant partner be able to pick up on and successfully translate these cues.

Often the roles being played during a BDSM scene do not necessarily reflect the roles the same individuals play in their daily lives (Hébert & Weaver, 2015). For many, the practice of BDSM is situationally specific. Some individuals practice only occasionally as a way of spicing up their sex lives, while others go to private BDSM parties or BDSM clubs which offer a place to socialize with like-minded practitioners and experiment in a safe and welcoming environment (Bezreh et al., 2012; Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006; ten Brink et al., 2021; Weinberg, 2006). These same individuals conduct themselves in their daily lives in ways that would never indicate that they may be involved in “deviant” sexual behavior (Bezreh et al., 2012; Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Wright, 2006). These individuals would likely seek BDSM activity partners in an online setting or for a single scene at a club or party event, while not necessarily carrying the relationship over into romantic or sexual partnership (Bezreh et al., 2012; Denney & Tewksbury, 2013; Jolene Sloan, 2015; Weinberg et al., 1984; Weinberg, 1987; Zambelli, 2017).

### ***Being Kinky: Orientation, Identity, and Relationships***

For some individuals kink is more than something they do, it is a part of who they are (Bezreh et al., 2012; Hébert & Weaver, 2014; Kolmes et al., 2006; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018; Moser & Levitt, 1987; Weinberg et al., 1984).

Research on sexual identity and behavior has traditionally been focused on non-heterosexual orientation and behavior, specifically gay sexual activity, and homosexual orientation. Weinberg, who is responsible for several seminal reviews of research on sadomasochism and social science (1987, 1994, 2006) first examined behavior and identity in gay males (1978). Weinberg (1978) makes a distinction between behavior and identity,

acknowledging that some individuals may identify as gay without ever having engaged in same-gender activity, and vice-versa. Though same-gender attraction and BDSM are not one and the same, some researchers have suggested that the principles Weinberg (1978) is discussing do perhaps apply to the kink community (Bezreh et al., 2012; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018).

There are some individuals who identify as either dominant or submissive and it becomes a necessary part of their mate selection process and the way in which they conduct many aspects of their intimate relationships (Hébert & Weaver, 2014; Kolmes et al., 2006; Moser & Levitt, 1987). In other words, they view themselves as kink-oriented and/or kink-identified.

Developing one's sense of sexual identity is a long process that happens over time (Martinez, 2018), for many starting in early childhood (Bezreh et al., 2012; Labreque et al, 2012; Rust 1993). In van Anders' (2015) Sexual Configuration Theory, there are three defining features of an individual's sexual orientation: identity, orientation, and status. Identity refers to "labels, communities, politics, positioning" (van Anders, 2015, p. 1178). This is what we commonly think of as, for example, lesbian, gay or straight, as well as how many partners one typically has (e.g., polyamorous, asexual, no sexual partners). However, van Anders (2015) expands traditional conceptualization to include the labels of "Dom, sub, kink-identified, etc." (p. 1178). Orientation refers to "interests, approaches, attractions, fantasies" and would include identifiers such as male-oriented, poly-oriented, and kink-oriented (van Anders, 2015, p. 1178). Finally, status refers to "behaviors, activities" (van Anders, 2015, p. 1178) and herein she includes BDSM activities among her examples. For those who self-identify as kink-oriented and/or kink-identified, BDSM would be a necessary component to their sexual identity and intimate relationships (Kolmes et al., 2006).

In research on developing gay identity, one key part of that identity development is when a man starts to recognize his behaviors as an element of his personality and to identify that, for him, “doing” becomes “being” (Weinberg, 1978). It is not unreasonable to apply our knowledge of gay sexual identity to kink sexual identity (Bezreh et al., 2012; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018). It is not unlikely then that, to successfully realize this piece of their identity, individuals who see BDSM as part of their sexual orientation may wish to integrate this behavior more fully into their lives, and consequently may seek out partners who are also BDSM-oriented or BDSM-identified (Bezreh et al., 2012). Some may even go as far as to live 24/7 master/slave or D/s lifestyles in which their relationships center on their role as dominant (master) or submissive (slave) (e.g., Dancer et al., 2006). This total integration with one’s day-to-day life suggests a certain level of identification with BDSM and these roles.

In these relationships, rather than a single pre-negotiated scene or sexual encounter, it is expected that each partner’s role as either dominant or submissive will characterize the nature of the relationship, and in some cases indefinitely – though this requires frequent check-ins and negotiation of the dynamic (Dancer et al., 2006; Kolmes et al., 2006). These relationships share the core components of all BDSM activity in that they are consensual, mutually negotiated and agreed upon, safe for all parties, and always voluntary (Dancer et al., 2006). However, because every contact in an ongoing intimate relationship is not inherently sexual, the D/s component dictates the relationship rules and the way the partners interact; kink serves an intimacy function in their close relationship that goes beyond sexual arousal (Dancer et al., 2006; Lawrence & Love-Crowell, 2008; Jolene Sloan, 2015; Weinberg et al., 1984).

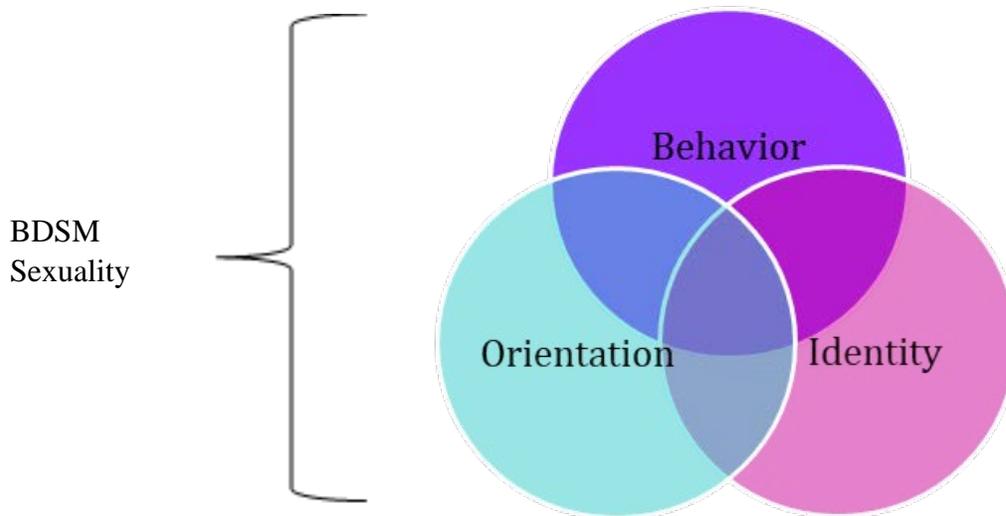
### **Research Questions**

Though this scoping review has been conducted to explore the research landscape as it pertains to BDSM behavior, orientation, and identity, I was also guided by research questions to help aid this search. The research questions guiding my review were: 1) Are there empirical differences between individuals who simply consider BDSM to be something they do (i.e., behavior only) and individuals who consider BDSM to be part of who they are (i.e., kink-identified)?, and 2) Are there any existing psychometrically validated, quantitative measures assessing BDSM as an identity component?

Applying van Anders' (2015) proposed dimensions, and supported by existing literature, I would like to introduce a model of BDSM/kink sexuality wherein some individuals "do" kink and/or engage in kink as a form of pleasure, intimacy, play, or leisure activity (behavior), some individuals prefer kink to other sexual behaviors and/or utilize kink as tool to explore other dimensions of their sexuality (orientation), and some individuals identify as kinky and/or identify with their local BDSM community as part of who they are as sexual and/or intimate, relational beings (identity). I also posit that, due to the fluid, nuanced, and dynamic (van Anders, 2015) nature of sexuality, and the relatedness of these dimensions, there will be notable overlap both in how these concepts are represented in the research and how participants (BDSM practitioners) define them for themselves (see Figure 1), so that a person's experiences with BDSM could exist on any combination of the three dimensions, or in the spaces between them. In this review, I will examine the available literature and compare it to this proposed model.

### **Figure 1**

#### *BDSM Sexuality Model*



### Scoping Review

Despite the evidence from both practitioners and researchers that BDSM can be conceptualized as behavior, orientation, and identity, little research has been done to assess the differences between these as they apply to BDSM and what those differences might mean for kinky individuals and kink communities. The purpose of this scoping review is to examine the available research on these dimensions of BDSM using the definitions for these dimensions provided by Sexual Configurations Theory (van Anders, 2015) as a guide, and to identify any gaps in the literature. I chose a systematic scoping review, as scoping reviews allow for themes to reveal themselves from within the literature and allow for more flexibility than other methods of literature review; it is a format which lends itself to under-studied fields of research (A. Brown et al., 2020). I've selected the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses) Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR; Tricco et al., 2018) as the guidelines for conducting this scoping review. This review includes both qualitative and quantitative literature on BDSM, and from within BDSM communities, that in some way refers

to or assesses BDSM as behavior, orientation, and/or identity as specified by Sexual Configurations Theory (van Anders, 2015).

## **Method**

### **Inclusion and Eligibility Criteria**

Inclusion required 1) full-text, peer reviewed empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method were included), 2) relation to the constructs of focus (e.g., identity, orientation, behavior), and 3) text written in English. Exclusion criteria were 1) literature reviews, book chapters, letters to the editor, and editorial articles, 2) studies from collectivistic cultures, and 2) studies published before 2013 (i.e., the release of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5; APA, 2013)).

### ***Individualistic vs. Collectivistic Cultures***

There is interesting, valuable BDSM research from communities all over the world. Researchers have demonstrated that individualistic and collectivistic values influence factors like decision making (Guess, 2004) and I wanted to make the most accurate and appropriate possible comparisons in my review. For this reason, I chose to exclude research that focused on participant groups from collectivistic cultures.

### ***BDSM and the DSM-5***

BDSM (i.e., sadism and masochism and/or sadomasochism) has a long history of being pathologized as a diagnosable mental health condition. Thanks to the tireless research and activism of several dedicated scientists (e.g., Moser & Kleinplatz, 2005; Wright, 2006), the most current edition of the DSM, the DSM-5 (APA, 2013), was the first edition to de-medicalize BDSM. Many BDSM behaviors and interests are still listed as paraphilias but are distinguished from paraphilic disorders (APA, 2013). The major points of distinction between a paraphilia and

a paraphilic disorder are that a paraphilic disorder causes significant distress/disruption to the individual and/or is predicated on a lack of consent from the other party involved in the behavior (APA, 2013). This understanding that BDSM is about consenting individuals engaging in behaviors they desire, not about abuse, violence, or mental instability, helped shift the research landscape to pave the way for research to approach BDSM as valid, normal, pleasurable, and potentially beneficial. This shift allows researchers to explore BDSM in a more nuanced way, instead of focusing on it as a diagnosable mental health condition (i.e., undesirable experience). It is for this reason that I chose to exclude research that took place prior to 2013, when the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) was first published.

### **Search Strategy (Information Sources, Search Strategy, and Selection of Sources of Evidence)**

This review is concerned with the intersections of sexuality and psychology as they relate to BDSM/kink. I performed a search of SpringerLink and PsychINFO alone on October 12, 2021. I chose SpringerLink because it is the home to several sexuality journals including the *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, where Sexual Configurations Theory (van Anders, 2015) and other sexuality research is published. I chose PsychINFO because the other field of interest to this review is psychology, so a psychological research focus was imperative. I chose search terms in relation to BDSM and guided by the research questions (i.e., various combinations of BDSM, kink, identity, orientation, and/or behavior). I did not separate out the words contained in the BDSM initialism in my search. See Table 1.

**Table 1***Example Search Strategy*


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PsychINFO Search Strategy

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1. Select “Peer reviewed” only and “post 2000” only (later filtered by post 2013 in Microsoft Excel)
2. Database search by terms “BDSM, identity, kink, behavior, orientation”
3. Database search by terms “BDSM or Kink AND identity and orientation and behavior”
4. Database search by terms “BDSM or Kink AND identity”
5. Database search by terms “BDSM or Kink AND orientation”
6. Database search by terms “BDSM or Kink AND behavior”

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*Note.* Literature search performed October 12, 2021

Ultimately, I made the choice to include studies for evidence in the review if they were focused on BDSM behavior, identity, and/or orientation, included a discussion of BDSM framed in behavior, orientation, and/or identity language as provided by Sexual Configurations Theory (van Anders, 2015), and/or were conducted with participant pools that self-identified, or had their identities assessed in some way, as BDSM participants. The final sample size was 60 articles. See Figure 2: PRISMA (Tricco et al., 2018) Flow Diagram for Search.

### **Coding (Data Charting Process and Data Items)**

Studies were uploaded into an excel spreadsheet and organized by study title, author, date of publication, and journal. Additional coding cells were added for *behavior*, *orientation*, *identity*, *type of study* (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, or mixed method), and *inclusion of a quantitative measure of BDSM identity*. During a full-text screen of all articles that remained

after viewing the abstract, studies were coded using the language provided by van Anders (2015) in the definitions of the dimensions of focus as displayed in Table 1 of the Sexual Configurations Theory (van Anders, 2015; p. 1178). For example, language such as “kink-identified” and “kink-community” were coded as *identity*, as were discussions/inclusion of BDSM role identities; “kink-oriented,” “fantasy,” and “attraction” are some examples of language used by studies coded as *orientation*; “kink-practitioners” and behavior lists are some examples of studies that were coded as *behavior*.

After the initial full-text screen, I removed studies that did not qualify for inclusion and then conducted a final review of the studies that remained. This time I added notes about themes that emerged and organized the studies based on those themes. I used a summative deductive approach for my content analysis. A summative approach to content analysis begins with identifying thematic content within the framework the of the study, with the purpose of exploring its usage (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; p.1283). A deductive approach is appropriate when applying existing information to a new context (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The aim of this scoping review was to understand how identity, orientation, and behavior are represented, handled, and conceptualized in the literature on BDSM. I had notions that there would be overlap in those main themes, but ultimately began my search open to discovering what ideas or sub-themes might emerge. During my first read through of the final 60 articles, to code for the main dimensions (i.e., themes) of interest (i.e., behavior, orientation, and identity), I noticed patterns emerging in each of those dimensions. Using this information and additionally informed by my background review of the literature on sexuality, I created a categorization matrix (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The matrix was built on six categories (i.e., sub-themes); two within each of the three main dimensions.

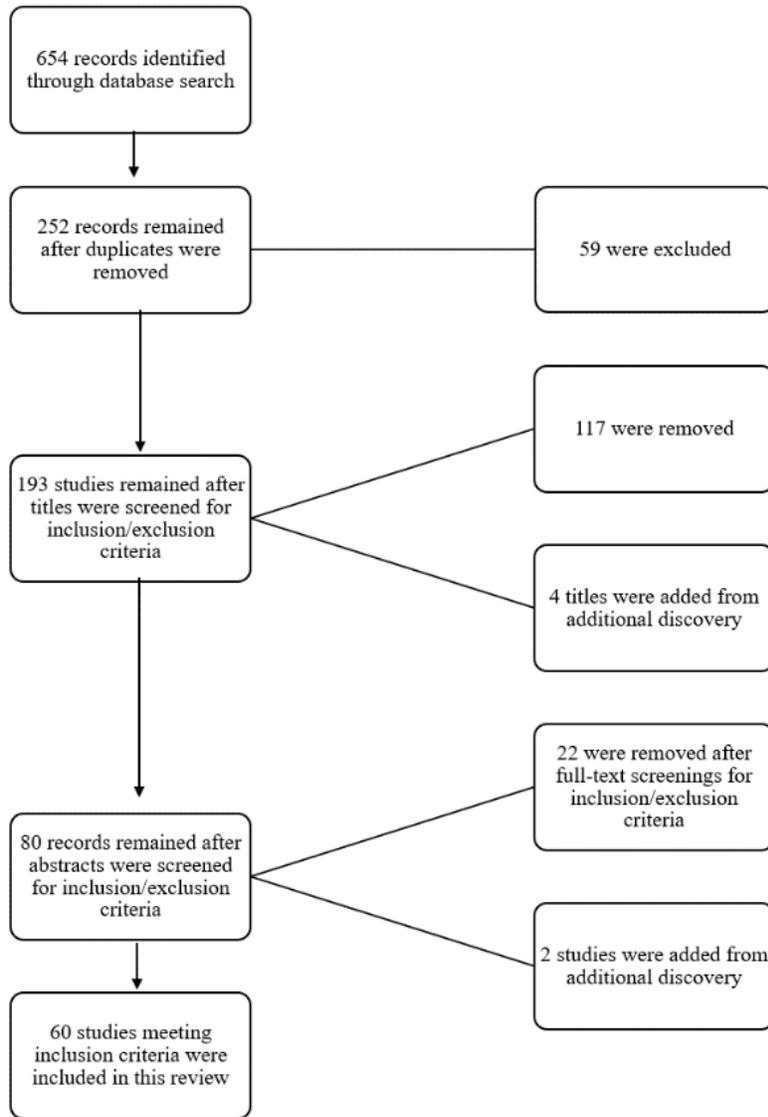
Not every article from the original 60 was able to be coded into one of one of these sub-themes. Once I developed this categorization matrix, I then did another evaluation of the 60 articles that had been identified for this scoping review, this time looking for language that may relate to one of the six categories. Behavior contained 1) Using behavior to assess association with/participation in BDSM ( $n = 7$ ) and 2) exploring BDSM as serious leisure and/or adult play ( $n = 13$ ). Orientation contained 3) exploring BDSM as fantasy ( $n = 8$ ) and 4) using BDSM as a tool for exploration of other identities, sexualities, and desires ( $n = 13$ ). Identity contained 5) BDSM role identification ( $n = 12$ ) and 6) identification/association with the larger BDSM community ( $n = 22$ ).

## **Results**

### **Study Characteristics**

**Figure 2**

*PRISMA (Tricco et al., 2018) Flow Diagram for search.*



*Note.* See Method for details about inclusion and exclusion criteria.

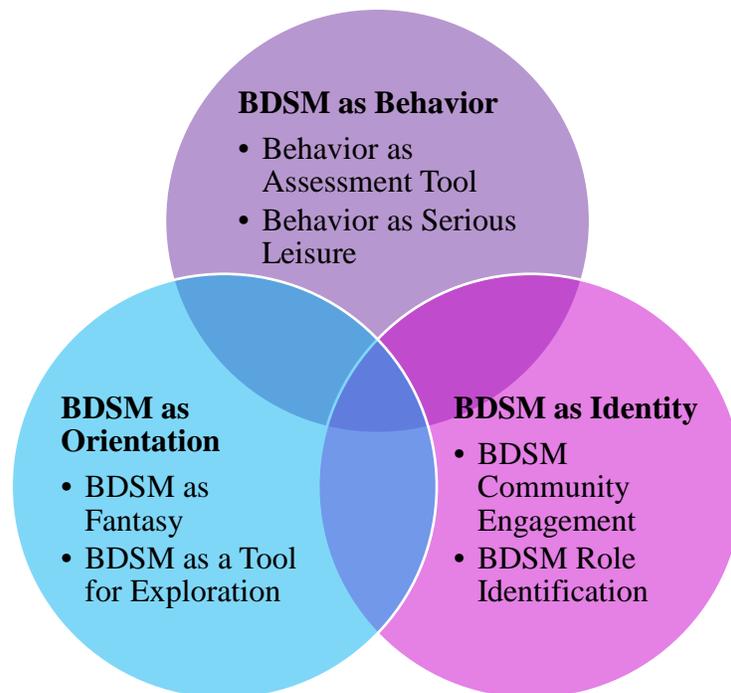
Due to the overlap in the use of language across the three dimensions, articles could be coded for one, two, or all three. 52 of 60 articles used language that indicated behavior as a focus of importance, 55 of 60 used orientation language, and 42 of 60 used identification language.

As expected, researchers are rarely making a distinction between behavior, orientation, and identity when discussing BDSM/kink populations. In 34 of 60 articles, language for all three

dimensions were used, and in many cases this was done seemingly interchangeably (see Table 2). When distinctions were made, several themes emerged in all three dimensions. In the behavior dimension I noticed an expected pattern of using behavior to assess affiliation with BDSM in some way and exploring whether BDSM, as a construct, is serious leisure (also sometimes called “adult play”). In the orientation dimension, several researchers explored BDSM as an element of fantasy; others approached BDSM as tool for exploration of other identities and interests, rather than being an identity unto itself. In the identity domain, BDSM role identification was an important element to describing and assessing BDSM identity; additionally, researchers explored community engagement as element of BDSM identity development.

### Figure 3

#### *Synthesis of Results*



### **BDSM as Behavior**

Of 60 articles included in the final analysis of this review, 52 of them used language that indicated some focus on or inclusion of discussion about BDSM behaviors. This is not surprising. Behaviors are distinctive elements of what makes a sexual or intimate interaction a kinky or BDSM-specific situation. Articles were coded as *behavior* inclusive if they used language that described BDSM behavior based on Sexual Configurations Theory (van Anders, 2015; p. 1178) dimensions (van Anders calls this “status”). Some examples of behavior language include<sup>2</sup> BDSM or kink practice/practitioners (Carlström, 2017; Cascalheira et al., 2021; Damm et al., 2018; Stockwell et al., 2017), BDSM sessions (Carlström, 2018), BDSM or kink behaviors (Carlström, 2017; Roush et al., 2017), fulfilling BDSM or kinky desires (Reback et al., 2019), BDSM experiences (Simula, 2019), BDSM participants (Simula, 2019), and/or BDSM activity(ies) (Rubinsky, 2018; Træen et al., 2021).

Behavior is often conflated with orientation and identity; 34 of 60 articles used language indicative of all three constructs. In some cases, however, engagement with kinky behavior is used to establish association with BDSM kink (in lieu of a psychometrically valid measure of BDSM/kink identity; see “BDSM Behavior as an Assessment Tool” and “Empirical Assessment of BDSM Identity”). Behavior assessments, like those assessing interest in and frequency of kink behaviors (e.g., Weierstall & Giebel, 2017), are also used to identify kink-practitioners in surveys that are focused on broader populations.

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<sup>2</sup> This list is exemplary, but not exhaustive. Furthermore, not every article that used this language was coded as “behavior” inclusive. In cases where it seemed clear that behavior simply was not the focus of the language and/or the article, or that some other construct was, other language was used for more appropriate coding.

Træen et al. (2021) included BDSM behaviors in a longer list of sexual activity to assess sexual variety in the Norwegian general population. They found that LGB (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual) individuals expressed greater curiosity about or experience with BDSM activity than their straight counterparts. They also found that LGB women had more positive attitudes about BDSM than the rest of the sample (Træen et al., 2021). Holvoet and colleagues (2017) used a list of BDSM behaviors in a larger survey to assess the prevalence of BDSM-related fantasy and activity the general population of Belgium. They found that 46.8% of their total sample (N = 1027) had done at least one BDSM behavior and another 22% reported having fantasized about at least one BDSM behavior in the past. Another research team (ten Brink et al., 2021) analyzed data from the Holvoet et al. (2017) study and found that among those who had done BDSM in the past, only 229 of them reported any sense of identification with BDSM.

These findings suggest that, while BDSM behavior is quite common, there are distinctions to be made between individuals who engage in BDSM behavior, individuals who fantasize about it or are oriented towards it, and individuals who consider it to be part of their identity. This is similar to what we know about other sexuality constructs – that behavior and identity are not the same thing (e.g., 73% of men who have sex with men (MSM) identify as straight (Pathela et al., 2006; Zeglin, 2020)).

### ***BDSM Behavior as an Assessment Tool***

Both social and academic interest in BDSM is, in large part, due to the erotic and intimate contextualization of experiences focused on pain/intense sensation, humiliation, and power imbalance. This longstanding cultural and academic fascination with BDSM behaviors has led many researchers to heavily rely on behavior to characterize individuals involved with BDSM. It is no wonder, then, that researchers wish to understand the draw of these behaviors (Labrecque

et al., 2021). Behaviors commonly associated with BDSM practice can be useful tools when studying those who practice them.

When using behavior as a measure of participants' involvement with BDSM, researchers frequently ask about both interest in and frequency of engagement with various behaviors (Holvoet et al., 2017; Schuerwegen et al., 2021; ten Brink et al., 2021; Weierstall & Giebel, 2017), the implication being that greater scores on these metrics means greater involvement with BDSM.

There is one measure that was created in the hopes it would be used to assess "a person's attraction to SM fantasies and practices" (i.e., behavior and orientation, but not identity; Weierstall & Giebel, 2017; p. 741). Weierstall & Geibel (2017) designed a measure with 24 items, some of which they conceptualized as dominant (i.e., active voice, "spanking your partner"; p. 737), which they called the SMCL Dominance Subscale (Cronbach's alpha = .89) and some of which they conceptualized as submissive (i.e., passive voice, "getting spanked by your partner"; p. 737), which they called the SMCL Submission Subscale (Cronbach's alpha = .96). Sub-scoring based on one of the factors they studied, pleasure gain, was reliable and valid. They ultimately, however, did not recommend computation of sub-scores "due to the unequal factor structure" (p. 741) between the two subscales. They also did not recommend "the computation of a respective sum score" (p. 741). The "content validity and comprehensiveness of the scale" were not demonstrated (p.742). Additionally, the researchers equated active/giving behavior with dominance and passive/receptive behavior with submission, though we know from the community that not all "tops" (i.e., active/givers) are dominant and not all "bottoms" (i.e., passive/receivers) are submissives (see Martinez, 2018).

Rather than asking about ‘interest’ broadly, Monteiro Pascoal and colleagues (2015) asked about favorite activities. Comparing favorite activities to those most frequently engaged in, the researchers were able to demonstrate almost no overlap between the two categories; the activities most frequently engaged in were rarely participants’ favorites (Monteiro Pascoal et al., 2015). In addition to being interesting, this finding has important implications for further study of behavior occurrence for BDSM practitioners. Access to favorite activities might be impeded by internalized stigma about the favorite activities, lack of resources (no money to buy gear), lack of access to appropriate setting (no local club or dungeon around), or lack of access to a partner who shares these specific favorite interests (Monteiro Pascoal et al., 2015).

In studying BDSM as an embodied experience, Turley (2016) did not assess experiences using a list of behaviors but was nonetheless focused on the behavioral aspects of BDSM for the participants in her study. BDSM has been posited as a tool for exploration by several researchers (see “BDSM as a Tool for Exploration”). In this study, participants described experiences of BDSM framed as an opportunity to explore their sexualities, their bodies, and their senses, allowing them to be fully embodied in ways unique to their BDSM practice – a “sense of embodied liberation” (Turley, 2016; p. 149).

In examining suicide risk amongst BDSM practitioners, researchers offered participants a list of behaviors commonly associated with BDSM and asked them to rate the frequency with which they engaged with those behaviors (S. Brown et al., 2017). Acknowledging that BDSM can be psychologically intense and painful, as well as being physically intense and painful, they combined this assessment of behaviors with other measures to assess acquired ability to commit suicide (which is not the same as likeliness to commit suicide but is a suicide risk factor) via factors such as fearless about death and pain tolerance – factors which were exemplified by some

of the behaviors queried (S. Brown et al., 2017). For men in their study, Brown and colleagues (2017) found that greater engagement in BDSM was associated with greater odds of having had a previous suicide attempt, which was mediated by acquired ability to commit suicide.

Though behavior is just one element of engagement with BDSM – alongside orientation and identity – frequency of, interest in, and preferences around behavior are clearly important factors in investigating various phenomena within the BDSM community.

### ***BDSM as Serious Leisure and/or Adult Play***

In the literature on BDSM behavior, one theme that emerged was an examination of BDSM as adult play and/or serious leisure. Several studies, while not focused on the study of play and/or leisure specifically, viewed BDSM through a play or recreational lens, using language like BDSM play (Hébert & Weaver, 2014, 2015; Martinez, 2018; Turley, 2016), adult play (Langdridge & Lawson, 2019; Turley et al., 2017, 2018), play partners (Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Martinez, 2018; Rehor, 2015), and play parties (Albury, 2015), and/or frequently referring to BDSM behaviors as play (e.g., blood play, pup play, wax play, role play, breast play) (Albury, 2015; Langdridge & Lawson, 2019; Rehor, 2015; Turley, 2016; Wignall & McCormack, 2017). One study (Denney & Tewksbury, 2013) also made a brief but notable comparison between hobbies and BDSM when discussing online community formation.

Two studies examined BDSM as serious leisure (Wignall & McCormack, 2017; Williams et al., 2016). Williams et al. (2016) applied a model for serious leisure that included the following criteria: the activity must be freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, associated with psychological benefits, be personally meaningful, and have an association with a specific identification (p. 1092). They were able to establish that BDSM fit those criteria, additionally demonstrating benefits associated with BDSM found in other research as well. Some of these

benefits were pleasure and enjoyment (Labrecque et al., 2021; Langdrige & Lawson, 2019; Turley et al., 2017), fun (Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Turley et al., 2017), recreation (Turley et al., 2017; Wignall & McCormack, 2017), escape from self and/or everyday life (Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2021; Langdrige & Lawson, 2019), improved relationships (Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Labrecque et al., 2021; Langdrige & Lawson, 2019), and personal growth (Hébert & Weaver, 2015). Wignall & McCormack (2017) explored the pup play community specifically and were able to demonstrate some, but not all the criteria for the serious leisure model they selected. Specifically, their interviews did not reveal “durable benefits” to pup play (p. 808), and they called for additional research. Serious leisure is also characterized by the time commitment and skill level required of it, both of which were factors demonstrated to be associated with BDSM (Wignall & McCormack, 2017; Williams et al., 2016)

Turley and colleagues (2017) explored BDSM as a form of adult play, using what is known about the motivations and benefits of play in children and applying them to an adult, sexual model. Commonalities between types of play included imagination, creation of (and immersion into) an alternate reality, and the presence (and importance) of fun. Like research that looked at BDSM as serious leisure, Turley et al. (2017) discussed the potential seriousness of BDSM play. They described BDSM as play “taken seriously” (p. 326) and contextualized it as deep play. BDSM play requires physical and emotional risk awareness and often involves intense sensations and experiences, all of which make for a serious endeavor that may only later, after the fact, be recognized as “fun” (Turley et al., 2017). Additionally, play offers the player an opportunity to explore thoughts, behaviors, and emotions kink practitioners may not have another outlet for exploring (Turley et al., 2017). BDSM as a tool for exploration was another common theme revealed in this literature review (see “BDSM as a Tool for Exploration”).

### **BDSM as Orientation**

If behavior is about activity, and identity is about sociology, labeling, and community, orientation is an issue of psychology (van Anders, 2015). Though it is a distinct construct from behavior and identity, orientation is also the language by which many describe it *plus* behavior and identity (van Anders, 2015). For this reason, there is greater occurrence of orientation language than of behavior or identity language that arose in this scoping review. 56 of 60 articles used language that indicated orientation in some way. Articles were coded as *orientation* inclusive if they used language that described BDSM orientation based on Sexual Configurations Theory (van Anders, 2015; p. 1178) dimensions. Some examples of orientation language include<sup>3</sup> BDSM and/or kink related fantasy(ies) (Holvoet et al., 2017; Kimberly et al., 2018; Rubinsky, 2018, 2021), BDSM and/or kinky desires (Mondin, 2017; Reback et al., 2019), BDSM or kink-oriented (Waldura et al., 2016), BDSM or kink individuals (New et al., 2021), BDSM or kink relationships (Rubinsky, 2018, 2020, 2021), and/or BDSM or kink tendencies (Weierstall & Giebel, 2017). “BDSM and/or Kink Relationships” was coded as orientation language because it implied, to me, that such relationships are predicated on an attraction based on mutual interest in BDSM, which is in alignment with the language provided by van Anders (2015).

### ***BDSM as Fantasy***

Because of how difficult it is to tease orientation apart from behavior and identity, both in the literature and conceptually, there were only two articles in which the researchers seemed to focus solely on the concept of orientation toward BDSM without concerning themselves with

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<sup>3</sup> This list is exemplary, but not exhaustive. Furthermore, not every article that used this language was coded as “orientation” inclusive. In cases where it seemed clear that orientation simply was not the focus of the language and/or the article, or that some other construct was, other language was used for more appropriate coding.

identity or behavior (Mondin, 2017; Yule et al., 2017). Mondin (2017) was interested in desire and fantasy through the lens of feminist, queer, and BDSM pornography. Their goal was to highlight themes that might explain why the formerly popular site Tumblr might be important to the creation and dissemination of feminist, queer, and BDSM porn. As a micro-blogging platform, Tumblr enabled users to post a wide variety of content, giving creators and users a space to explore alternative (i.e., not mainstream) themes and topics (Mondin, 2017). Ultimately this created a perfect home for all kinds of marginalized identities to explore fantasy, including those interested in BDSM.

Yule and colleagues (2017) explored fantasy and masturbation habits among asexual individuals. Asexuality is commonly associated with a lack of sexual desire; however asexual individuals were just as likely as allosexuals to fantasize about BDSM and fetish themes. Other research (Jolene Sloan, 2015) has demonstrated that the BDSM community has a unique draw to asexual individuals, since, despite common misconceptions about BDSM being a hypersexual community, BDSM centers direct communication, non-sexual intimacy, and other types of connection that make asexual individuals feel safe and validated (Jolene Sloan, 2015). This could explain the draw of BDSM fantasy to asexual individuals.

BDSM fantasy is rarely the focus of research on its own, typically being coupled with research on behavior and relationships, so it is not clear exactly how prevalent BDSM fantasy is among the general population. However, the popularity of BDSM in the mainstream, as evidenced by books like *Fifty Shades of Grey* and movies like *Secretary*, taken together with available research that demonstrates as many as 70% of people have done or fantasized about at least one BDSM behavior in their lifetime (Holvoet et al., 2017), we know that it is perhaps more common to have had some level of BDSM-related fantasy at least once than to not have done.

Orientation goes beyond fantasy, however, as stated above, and is often reflected in discussions of behavior and/or identity. One way that BDSM orientation is used alongside behavior and/or identity, but perhaps distinct from it, is in research that focuses on BDSM as a tool for exploration of some kind. Any research that discussed BDSM as an exploration tool was coded as “orientation” for the purpose of this scoping review, because I viewed it as an *interest* or *approach* (per Sexual Configurations Theory language as laid out in Table 1 of van Anders’ (2015) paper (p. 1178)) that allowed for an exploratory experience that some other activity may not have allowed for.

### ***BDSM as Tool for Exploration***

“Play enables experimentation with creativity, language, physical nuances, social roles, and conventions,” argue Turley et al. (2017, p. 1), “engaging in BDSM allows similar experimentation with gender, social non-conventions and physical and psychological sensations....” BDSM as a tool for exploration and experimentation was a common theme throughout the literature I reviewed. I coded this view of BDSM as “orientation” in that it was an approach and attraction to BDSM not as an identity in and of itself, necessarily (though perhaps in addition to BDSM as identity for some practitioners), but as a tool for investigating other identity elements and experiences.

The literature on play (see “BDSM as Serious Leisure and/or Adult Play”) contained arguments about the value of leisure, play, and recreation – through imagination – for exploring fantasies, desires, and experiences not otherwise possible to explore (e.g., Turley, 2016; Turley et al., 2017). In addition to playful exploration of fantasy, BDSM is often used by practitioners to explore other elements of oneself that have no other apparent outlet.

Some researchers (Jolene Sloan, 2015; Yule et al., 2017) have investigated the draw of BDSM for members of the Asexual community. Asexuality is often defined as a lack of desire for sexual engagement/sexual relationships. Though we acknowledge that BDSM is not inherently sexual, the sexuality and eroticism of BDSM has received the bulk of the attention both from researchers and from mainstream sources like news and entertainment media. As discussed previously (see “BDSM as Fantasy”), asexual individuals have found a home in BDSM communities for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the BDSM community’s hyper focus on direct communication, consent, and diverse expressions of intimacy (Jolene Sloan, 2015; Kattari, 2015). This sexual script negotiation and expectation of flexibility gives practitioners the necessary tools to define what kink and sex mean to them, allowing asexual practitioners the opportunity to shape intimate experiences that focus on something other than eroticism, orgasm, and the expectation of sexual activity (Jolene Sloan, 2015; Yule et al., 2017). This culture of creativity, consent, and communication as a tool for exploring intimacy and connection beyond heteronormative sexual scripting is also beneficial to many allosexual (i.e., opposite of asexual) individuals, like disabled individuals (Kattari, 2015) and genderqueer individuals (Barsigian et al., 2020), who find it challenging to connect in traditional sexuality spaces that may focus on gender attraction or able-bodied behaviors.

Research on BDSM as a tool for spiritual exploration (Baker, 2018; Fennell, 2018) is an emerging body of research. Fennell (2018) found that nearly half of all American and Canadian BDSM practitioners who reported being heavily involved in BDSM also reported that they “sometimes engage in BDSM for spiritual fulfillment” (p. 1045). Experiencing kink as sacred or spiritual is less about any specific connection to a higher power and more about the nature of kink to provide opportunities for full embodiment (Baker, 2018; Turley, 2016) and altered states

of consciousness (Ambler et al., 2017; Baker, 2018). Baker (2018) interviewed some practitioners who experienced spontaneous moments of spirituality and others who induced these experiences intentionally, both of which reported several psychological benefits to these spiritual BDSM scenes including visionary experiences and personal and lasting transformations.

Finally, a pattern of individuals using BDSM as a tool for exploring and challenging the expected notions of sexual orientation (Albury, 2015; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018), embodied gender and gender identity (Bauer, 2016, 2018; Martinez, 2018; Simula & Sumerau, 2019; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018), and gender roles (Bauer, 2016; Simula & Sumerau, 2019) emerged. Because of the dynamic nature of BDSM script negotiation, combined with the emphasis on fantasy and play, BDSM offers participants opportunities to experiment with sexual behaviors that may not completely align with their core identities or real-world lived experiences (e.g, Albury, 2015). This allows individuals to play with how they perform their gender, what roles they take on sexually and intimately, and how they sexually interact with others. These experiences have safe spaces inside the confines of a BDSM scene, which is characterized by consent, communication, and intimacy. Albury (2015) noted the existence of these sexual dualities for many BDSM practitioners, conjuring “Margaret Robinson’s (2013) framework of ‘strategic identity’” (p.649). The concept of ‘strategic identity’ was also present (though not explicitly named) in Bauer’s (2016) research on masculinity exploration amongst lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals who practice BDSM. Bauer (2016) found that these individuals use BDSM practices to explore their own gender expressions and gender identities, explore their connections to their partners, and disrupt traditional notions of masculinity, largely without the presence of masculine bodies. Bauer (2017) also explored how the same population used BDSM as tool for exploring

gender and power dynamics in nontraditional ways such as through age play and kinship/incest play.

Due to the strong emphasis on consent, negotiation, direct communication, creativity, non-traditional sexual scripting, and intimacy both with and without eroticism, BDSM/kink fosters an ideal set of tools for all sorts of sexual exploration, whether kinksters identify with BDSM or not.

### **BDSM as Identity**

Of 60 articles included in the final analysis for this scoping review, 43 used language that indicated kink/BDSM identity in some way. Articles were coded as *identity* inclusive if they used language that described BDSM identity based on Sexual Configurations Theory (van Anders, 2015; p. 1178) dimensions. Some examples of identity language include<sup>4</sup> BDSM identities and/or kink-identified (e.g., Hughes & Hammack, 2019; Leistner & Mark, 2016; Meyer & Chen, 2019; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018; Vilkin & Sprott, 2021), BDSM and/or kink community (e.g., Bowling et al., 2021; Fanghanel, 2020; Holt, 2016; Hughes & Hammack, 2019; Rehor, 2015), and/or BDSM subculture (e.g., Drdová & Saxonberg, 2020; Fanghanel, 2020; Fennell, 2018; Zambelli, 2017), as well as any research that looked at BDSM role identity or used role identity as a factor in some way. Researchers often use this language in conjunction with some definition for BDSM, but without providing any accompanying operational definition for the identity component, or while conflating identity with some other component like behavior

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<sup>4</sup> This list is exemplary, but not exhaustive. Furthermore, not every article that used this language was coded as “identity” inclusive. In cases where it seemed clear that identity simply was not the focus of the language and/or the article, or that some other construct was, other language was used for more appropriate coding.

and/or orientation. Though no consistently offered operational definition for kink identity exists, attempts have been made to contextualize kink identity through other theoretical frameworks.

Hughes and Hammack (2019) explored identity sentiment and identity development among kink-identified individuals in a manner that viewed identity through the social psychological lenses of meaning making, stigma management, and narrative engagement (p. 152). They acknowledge what they refer to as the “competing narratives” (p. 153) of kink as both a source of pathology, stigma, and shame, and a source of pleasure, freedom, and healthy sexuality; they asked individuals that identify as kinky how they reconcile those narratives. Aside from asking participants to self-identify as kinky, they did not measure kink identity against any other construct. They also did not attempt to tease apart or compare kink practitioners who consider kink part of their identity to those who participate in kink but do not necessarily identify with it.

Galupo and colleagues (2016) explored other types of sexual orientation and identity, but, like other researchers who have done so, found kink identity to be a theme that emerged. In a study that focused on transgender individuals’ conceptualizations of their sexualities, they found that kink sexuality was an important and meaningful lens through which their gender and sexuality were understood, performed, and explored (Galupo et al., 2016). These findings were consistent with work by other researchers who looked at queer sexuality and the role of kink (e.g., Bauer, 2018; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018).

### ***BDSM Community Engagement***

Fanghanel (2019), Holt (2016), and Zambelli (2017), are examples of researchers who explored kink identity through the lens of kink-community involvement. They each explored, to varying degrees, the ways individuals identify with and adhere to community norms and the

ways communities regulate such adherence. Zambelli (2017) took additional steps to make the identity-community connection by including a model that outlined “Degrees of Identification with Italian BDSM Subculture” (p. 481, Figure 1).

In Zambelli’s (2017) model there are two dimensions, centrality and salience, which form individual group member identification. On the top end of the centrality axis, they placed “Identification with larger society” and at the other end is “Identification with the BDSM group.” On the left end of the salience axis, they placed “Identity latent, rarely displayed” and at the other end is “Identity activated in many situations in daily life.” They then go on to describe four ideal types of BDSM practitioner, one for each of the four quarters of the centrality/salience graph.

“...(1) Garrett, the Testimonial, who displays his identity many times during his daily routine [high centrality and salience]; (2) Oliver, the Amateur, who rather identifies with wider society [low centrality and high salience]; (3) Eric, the Virtual Player, with latent identity/identification, rarely displayed [low centrality and salience]; (4) Ginger, the Committed Novice, who strongly identifies with the BDSM group [high centrality and low salience]. (p. 482)”

In Zambelli’s (2017) study, they articulate the criteria for group formation and the criteria for identification within that group and then apply this model to BDSM subculture, providing a definition of identity that includes, and to some degree necessitates, group/community engagement.

### ***BDSM Role Identification***

When discussing and studying BDSM identity, it is important to keep in mind the nuance within the broader BDSM construct; namely, practitioner role identity. Role identity refers to the BDSM role with which an individual practitioner identifies. Because power exchange is a defining characteristic of BDSM behavior and relationships, roles reflect one’s position of

power, whether that be in a single scene or in an ongoing relationship. There are D-type (dominant) role identities that include (but are not limited to) dominant, top, master/mistress, owner, handler, daddy/mommy/caregiver; S-type (submissive) role identities that include (but are not limited to) submissive, bottom, slave, pup/animal, babygirl/baby boy; sadists (commonly associated with D-types in the research (e.g., S. Brown et al., 2017), but not inherently dominant); masochists (commonly associated with S-types in the research (e.g., S. Brown et al., 2017), but not inherently submissive); and switches/verses – who alternate between D and S-type role identity and behavior (Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Martinez, 2018; Schuerwegen et al., 2021; Wignall & McCormack, 2017).

In laudable attempts to destigmatize and depathologize BDSM and those who practice it, research into the characteristics of BDSM practitioners frequently compares kinky folks to their vanilla (non-kinky) counterparts in the general population (e.g., Holvoet et al., 2017) to establish evidence that individuals who practice BDSM are not in some way maladjusted compared to those who do not practice (e.g., ten Brink et al., 2021). Truly understanding those who practice BDSM, however, also requires taking a more in-depth look into the community and examining the nature of practice of/association with BDSM based on role identity. Role identity is one of the most important components of BDSM community building (Denney & Tewksbury, 2013).

One drawback of this emerging area of research is the over-simplification of most researchers' approach to examining role identity (e.g., Hébert & Weaver, 2015; Martinez, 2018; Weierstall & Giebel, 2017). BDSM practitioners frequently emphasize the importance of understanding the many roles present in the community and the important differences between them (e.g., Hébert & Weaver, 2015), however even if that is acknowledged by researchers, when data is ultimately analyzed and presented, roles are frequently collapsed into two categories (i.e.,

dominant and submissive) or sometimes three (i.e, dom, sub, switch). As such, the data presented may, in many cases, not accurately reflect the nuance of the BDSM community and those who practice.

Several researchers asked about role identity, either by asking BDSM practitioners to self-identify (e.g., Erickson et al., 2021; Wignall & McCormack, 2017) or by offering them choices and asking them to select the options that best fit them (e.g., Rogak & Connor, 2018), but not all researchers subsequently compared these groups (e.g., Williams et al., 2016).

When researchers did compare role identities in their data analysis, they were able to establish empirical differences between BDSM practitioners based on their role identity. Dominants were found to exhibit more active coping strategies (i.e., taking action and active problem solving) (Schuerwegen et al., 2021), were more likely to have a secure attachment style (ten Brink et al., 2021), greater acquired capability for suicide (i.e., fearlessness of death and pain tolerance) (S. Brown et al., 2017), greater desire for control, extraversion, self-esteem, and life satisfaction (Hébert & Weaver, 2014), and had less difficulty than switches when explaining their relationship styles to outsiders (Vilkin & Sprott, 2021). Dominants were described by BDSM practitioners as empathic and nurturing, attentive and responsible, exhibiting a desire to take control and an ability to do so (Hébert & Weaver, 2015). In most cases, researchers found that dominants were also more likely to be men (e.g., Martinez, 2018; Rogak & Connor, 2018; Williams et al., 2016), and more BDSM participants who are people of color (POC) were likely to be dominants/masters (Erickson et al., 2021).

Submissives, on the other hand, exhibited higher levels of disinhibition and were more likely to cope by seeking advice (Schuerwegen et al., 2021), were more likely to have an anxious-preoccupied attachment style and reported more experience with unwanted sexual

contact (ten Brink et al., 2021), and reported greater levels of emotionality (Hébert & Weaver, 2014). Submissives were described by BDSM practitioners as willing to give up control and exhibiting a desire to please (Hébert & Weaver, 2015). Submissives were more likely to be women (e.g., Martinez, 2018; Rogak & Connor, 2018; Williams et al., 2016) and non-POC (Erickson et al., 2021).

When studied, switches were found to be high on disinhibition along with submissives, and high on active coping strategies like dominants (Schuerwegen et al., 2021), were similar to submissives regarding reports of experience with unwanted sexual contact (ten Brink et al., 2021), and found it more difficult than dominants to explain their relationships to outsiders (Vilkin & Sprott, 2021). Switches were also more likely to be queer (e.g., Martinez, 2018; Williams et al., 2016).

All three role identities expressed similar levels of sensation seeking, coping skills, and using BDSM as tool to cope with life (Schuerwegen et al., 2021), and more experience with physical beatings as an adult (ten Brink et al., 2021) (ten Brink and colleagues (2021) called this PBA and “adult abuse” but acknowledged this variable of study could be confounded with some BDSM behaviors and not accurately reflect abuse experiences). Dominants and submissives exhibited similar levels of relationship satisfaction (switches were not included in this analysis) (Rogak & Connor, 2018), empathy, honesty-humility, openness to experience, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and altruism (Hébert & Weaver, 2014), and equally described many benefits of their participation in/identification with BDSM (i.e., fun, variety, community, pleasure from pleasing others, improved relationships, psychological release, freedom from day to day roles, personal growth, pleasure and arousal) (Hébert & Weaver, 2015).

Evidence exists that different types of individuals are drawn to different role identities, and that role identity has an important impact on one's experiences with and relationship to BDSM. Researchers should continue to make these distinctions when studying the BDSM community as well as find ways to expand on their assessments to more comprehensively capture the nuance of the multiple role identities that exist.

### ***Empirical Assessment of BDSM identity***

A clear gap in the literature is the complete absence of any psychometrically validated instrument for assessing BDSM identity (see Vilkin & Sprott, 2021). In the absence of such a measure, researchers are left to create their own on a case-by-case basis. To assess association with BDSM, most researchers will simply rely on participants to self-select into studies directed at the BDSM community, or will ask participants to self-identify as kinky and perhaps indicate their kink role identity (see "BDSM Role Identity") in a single question (qualitative) (Vilkin & Sprott, 2021) or a one or two item measure (quantitative) (Erickson et al., 2021; Vilkin & Sprott, 2021; Williams et al., 2016; Worthen & Haltom, 2020). When researchers choose to expand, they frequently rely on lists of behaviors and BDSM role identities to assess engagement with BDSM (see "BDSM Behavior as an Assessment Tool" and "BDSM Role Identity").

In the studies where assessment of BDSM engagement and identity was more robust, researchers asked additional questions that included such information as questions about interest in/frequency/level of engagement regarding BDSM participation (S. Brown et al., 2017; Martinez, 2018; Rogak & Connor, 2018; Schuerwegen et al., 2021), age at first interest (Holvoet et al., 2017; Monteiro Pascoal et al., 2015), age at first onset/years of experience/initial involvement in kink (Carlström, 2019; Holvoet et al., 2017; Monteiro Pascoal et al., 2015; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018), favorite practices (Monteiro Pascoal et al., 2015), fantasies about kink

(Holvoet et al., 2017; ten Brink et al., 2021), how do participants define kink/BDSM (Carlström, 2019; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018), do participants identify with kink/BDSM (Sprott & Hadcock, 2018), what is their understanding of kink community values (Sprott & Hadcock, 2018), preferred settings to practice (Holvoet et al., 2017; ten Brink et al., 2021), role fluidity/change of identity over time (Martinez, 2018; Sprott & Hadcock, 2018) and was their kink sexuality experienced like their sexual orientation (Sprott & Hadcock, 2018). These more robust lines of questioning lead to more robust information and analysis.

ten Brink and colleagues (2020) used data collected from a 2017 study (Holvoet et al., 2017) which assessed BDSM prevalence in the general population of Belgium using a 54-item BDSM behaviors measure. This measure asked participants to indicate their level of interest in 54 behaviors commonly associated with BDSM then organized participants into one of three groups based on their answers (i.e., 1. no interest, 2. fantasy only, no practice of BDSM, 3. put BDSM into practice). They also categorized the 54 behaviors into four BDSM subscales: 1. Submissiveness, 2. Dominance, 3. Voyeurism, and 4. Attributes. The total score of all four subscales is the participants' total BDSM Score (Holvoet et al., 2017). Using this assessment, researchers also asked participants to identify the extent to which they identified themselves as interested in BDSM and asked 11 questions about situational context for where they practice, when they first became interested in BDSM, and when they first disclosed that interest to someone else (Holvoet et al., 2017). Holvoet and colleagues (2017) used this assessment to compare BDSM practitioners to the general population, rather than comparing differences between types of BDSM practitioners. When ten Brink et al. (2021) analyzed this data, they divided the participants into groups based on whether they practice BDSM ( $n = 771$ ) or not ( $n = 581$ ). For practitioners, they further divided them into groups of individuals who reported

practicing privately at home (BDSM-PP;  $n = 559$ ) and individuals who reported practicing in community settings (BDSM-CP;  $n = 212$ ). Only 229 of the 771 BDSM practitioners indicated that they identified themselves as BDSM practitioners and identified with any specific BDSM role; most of those individuals came from the BDSM-CP group. Additionally, they found that the BDSM-CP group scored higher than the other groups on their total BDSM Score. ten Brink et al. (2020) also looked at differences between dominants (28.8%), submissives (39.5%), and switches (31.1%) among those participants who indicated a role identity ( $n = 229$ ). They found that all 3 role identities had more secure attachment than the controls (i.e., practitioners who did not indicate a role identity;  $n = 472$ ), and dominants had the strongest association with secure attachment than submissives and switches (who were more likely to have an anxious-avoidant attachment style than their dominant counterparts). While the Holvoet et al. (2017) study adds to the literature comparing BDSM practitioners to non-practitioners in valuable ways, it also offers a potentially valuable assessment tool for examining differences within BDSM practitioner groups. The ten Brink et al. (2021) study is unique in that it demonstrates quantitative evidence that there are empirically significant differences between those who identify with BDSM/as kinky and those who do not, even amongst practitioners. It also adds to the literature on empirical differences based on BDSM role identity for those who identify as kinky. Previous researchers have also shown via qualitative literature that, amongst BDSM practitioners, there are distinctions between those who simply do BDSM and those who identify as kinky (e.g., Bezreh et al., 2012); and ten Brink et al. (2021) adds to this literature by being among the first to identify these two groups and assess differences between them quantitatively.

Sprott and Hadcock (2018) conducted a qualitative analysis that explored BDSM identity as akin to other sexual orientation identities (i.e., bisexuality, pansexuality, queer sexuality),

under the premise that the term queer, for some people who use it, includes their kink/BDSM sexuality. Sprott and Hadcock (2018; p. 230) asked participants questions about their identity as kinky (e.g. “How do you identify?”, “why those identities and labels, and not something else?”, “how important are those identities to you?”), their coming out process (e.g., “Are you out to people as kinky?”, “How important is it to you to be out as kinky?”), their journey as a kinky person (e.g., “When were you first interested in kink or kink behavior?”, “How has your kink identity changed over time?”, “Has the significance, or importance, of the kink identity changed over time?”), their values and worldview as kinky, and questions about whether kink is an orientation (e.g., “What is your sexual orientation?”, “Do you experience your desires and interests around kink in the same way as your sexual orientation, or do you experience it as being different from your sexual orientation?”). Through their qualitative interviews, Sprott and Hadcock (2018) demonstrated evidence that for some people,

“...there is an intersection of kink and bisexual/pansexual orientation especially around the category or label *queer*; that kink behaviors and relationships allow for the exploration of sexual orientation and gender identity in some unique ways; and that kink communities and scenes can be important avenues for coming out around sexual orientation and identity, in terms of healing from isolation and shame” (p. 226).

These researchers (Sprott & Hadcock, 2018) posit, and I agree, that the inclusion of kink in discussions of sexual orientation and gender is important and complex, raising questions about what identity and orientation even mean.

### **Results of Individual Sources of Evidence**

**Table 2***Results of Individual Sources of Evidence*

Authors	Pub. year	Appears in results section under this/these headings:	Dimension(s) coded to:
Albury	2015	BDSM as Serious Leisure and/or Adult Play; BDSM as a Tool for Exploration	B, O
Ambler et al.	2017	BDSM as a Tool for Exploration	B, O
Baker	2018	BDSM as a Tool for Exploration	B, O
Barsigian et al.	2020	BDSM as a Tool for Exploration	O, I
Bauer	2016	BDSM as a Tool for Exploration	B, O
Bauer	2018	BDSM as Identity; BDSM as a Tool for Exploration	B, O, I
Bowling et al.	2021	BDSM as Identity	O, I
S. Brown et al.	2017	BDSM Behavior as an Assessment Tool; BDSM Role Identification; Empirical Assessment of BDSM Identity	B, O, I
Carlstrom	2019	Empirical Assessment of BDSM Identity	B, O, I
Carlstrom	2017	BDSM as Behavior	B, O, I
Carlstrom	2018	BDSM as Behavior	B, O, I
Cascalheira et al.	2021	BDSM as Behavior	B, O, I
Damm et al.	2018	BDSM as Behavior	B, O, I
Denney & Tewksbury	2013	BDSM as Serious Leisure and/or Adult Play; BDSM Role Identification	B, O, I
Drdova & Saxonberg	2020	BDSM as Identity	O, I
Erickson et al.	2021	BDSM Role Identification; Empirical Assessment of BDSM Identity	B, O, I
Fanghanel	2020	BDSM as Identity	B, O, I
Fennell	2018	BDSM as Identity; BDSM as a Tool for Exploration	B, O, I
Galupo et al.	2016	BDSM as Identity	O, I
Hebert & Weaver	2014	BDSM as Serious Leisure and/or Adult Play; BDSM Role Identification	B, O, I
Hebert & Weaver	2015	BDSM as Serious Leisure and/or Adult Play; BDSM Role Identification	B, O, I
Holt	2016	BDSM as Identity	B, I
Holvoet et al.	2017	BDSM as Behavior; BDSM as Orientation; BDSM Behavior as an	B, O, I

Authors	Pub. year	Appears in results section under this/these headings:	Dimension(s) coded to:
		Assessment Tool; BDSM Role Identification; Empirical Assessment of BDSM Identity	
Hughes & Hammack	2019	BDSM as Identity	B, O, I
Jolene Sloan	2015	BDSM as Orientation; BDSM as a Tool for Exploration	B, O
Kattari	2015	BDSM as a Tool for Exploration	B, O, I
Kimberly et al.	2018	BDSM as Orientation	B, O
Labrecque et al.	2021	BDSM Behavior as an Assessment Tool; BDSM as Serious Leisure and/or Adult Play	B, O, I
Langdridge & Lawson	2019	BSDM as Serious Leisure and/or Adult Play	B, O, I
Leistner & Mark	2016	BDSM as Identity	B, I
Martinez	2018	BDSM as a Tool for Exploration; BDSM as Serious Leisure and/or Adult Play; BDSM Role Identification; Empirical Assessment of BDSM Identity	B, O, I
Meyer & Chen	2019	BDSM as Identity	O, I
Mondin	2017	BDSM as Orientation	O
Monteiro Pascoal et al.	2015	BDSM Behavior as an Assessment Tool; Empirical Assessment of BDSM Identity	B, O, I
New et al.	2021	BDSM as Orientation	B, O, I
Reback et al.	2019	BDSM as Behavior; BDSM as Orientation	B, O
Rehor	2015	BDSM as Identity; BDSM as Serious Leisure and/or Adult Play	B, O, I
Rogak & Connor	2018	BDSM Role Identification; Empirical Assessment of BDSM Identity	B, O, I
Roush et al.	2017	BDSM as Behavior	B, O, I
Rubinsky	2018	BDSM as Behavior; BDSM as Orientation	B, O, I
Rubinsky	2020	BDSM as Orientation	B, O
Rubinsky	2021	BDSM as Orientation	B, O, I
Schuerwegen et al.	2021	BDSM Behavior as an Assessment Tool; BDSM Role Identification; Empirical Assessment of BDSM Identity	B, O, I
Simula	2019	BDSM as Behavior	B, O, I
Simula & Sumerau	2019	BDSM as a Tool for Exploration	B, O

Authors	Pub. year	Appears in results section under this/these headings:	Dimension(s) coded to:
Sprott & Hadcock	2018	BDSM as Identity; BDSM as a Tool for Exploration; Empirical Assessment of BDSM Identity	B, O, I
Stockwell et al.	2017	BDSM as Behavior	B, O
ten Brink et al.	2021	BDSM as Behavior; BDSM Behavior as an Assessment Tool; BDSM Role Identification; Empirical Assessment of BDSM Identity	B, O, I
Traeen et al.	2021	BDSM as Behavior	B
Turley	2016	BDSM Behavior as an Assessment Tool; BDSM as Serious Leisure and/or Adult Play; BDSM as a Tool for Exploration	B, O
Turley et al.	2017	BDSM as Serious Leisure and/or Adult Play; BDSM as a Tool for Exploration	B, O
Turley et al.	2018	BDSM as Serious Leisure and/or Adult Play	B, O
Vilkin & Sprott	2021	BDSM as Identity; BDSM Role Identification; Empirical Assessment of BDSM Identity	B, O, I
Waldura et al.	2016	BDSM as Orientation	B, O, I
Weierstall & Giebel	2017	BDSM Behavior as an Assessment Tool; BDSM as Orientation	B, O
Wignall & McCormack	2017	BDSM as Serious Leisure and/or Adult Play; BDSM Role Identification	B, O, I
Williams et al.	2016	BDSM Role Identification; Empirical Assessment of BDSM Identity	B, O, I
Worthen & Haltom	2020	Empirical Assessment of BDSM Identity	I
Yule et al.	2017	BDSM as Orientation; BDSM as a Tool for Exploration	O
Zambelli	2017	BDSM as Identity	B, O, I

*Note:* Behavior (B), Orientation (O), Identity (I)

As predicted, while these dimensions are indeed unique constructs, there was substantial overlap in the ways they were presented and conceptualized, both by researchers and BDSM practitioners and community members in the literature (see Zambelli, 2017).

## Discussion

### Summary of Evidence

In this scoping review, I sought to investigate the literature on sexual identity, sexual orientation, and sexual behavior as they specifically relate to BDSM/kink and those who practice it and/or identify with it. Additionally, I sought to answer two questions: 1) are there empirical differences between individuals who consider BDSM to be something they do (i.e., behavior only) and individuals who consider BDSM to be part of who they are (i.e., kink-identified)?, and 2) are there any existing quantitative measures assessing BDSM as an identity component? To question 1, yes there were researchers who were able to differentiate between those who “do” BDSM and those who “are” kinky, and those researchers were able to establish statistically significant differences between those groups (ten Brink et al., 2021). To question 2, currently BDSM as identity is quantitatively assessed with measures created on a study-by-study basis relying on questions about behavior and role identity; there is no psychometrically validated measure that exists to assess BDSM as an identity component (Vilkin & Sprott, 2021).

The literature on BDSM, post DSM-5 (APA, 2013), is still in its infancy. Much of the current literature seems aimed at attempting to understand the nature of BDSM practitioners (e.g., Hébert & Weaver, 2014, 2015), why they’re drawn to BDSM (e.g, Labrecque et al., 2021), and/or the roles BDSM plays for them (e.g., Faccio et al., 2020; Schuerwegen et al., 2021), with a larger goal of continuing to destigmatize, depathologize, and legitimize the practice and community. Understanding the BDSM community, both from a behavior standpoint and a persons-who-practice standpoint, is an essential part of furthering the narrative that BDSM/kink is not inherently harmful, maladjusted, or rooted in trauma (e.g., ten Brink et al., 2021). What became clear in this review is that BDSM is appropriately situated in a sexuality and/or

relationships framework and using such a framework aids in conceptualizing it, as well as giving researchers and clinicians tools for understanding it.

Using Sexual Configuration Theory (van Anders, 2015) as a framework for conceptualizing behavior, orientation, and identity, I was able to identify a growing body of research that represents BDSM/kink as nuanced, complex, and serving multiple needs for those who practice and identify with it – with myriad outcomes as a result.

BDSM behavior is still the most frequently used tool for examining approaches to, interest in, experiences with, and association with BDSM (e.g., Holvoet et al., 2017; Schuerwegen et al., 2021; Weierstall & Giebel, 2017). It is also, alongside BDSM role identity, the most frequently used tool for assessing level of involvement/engagement with BDSM. It is clear from this review, however, that when it comes to BDSM, as with other types of sexuality, behavior does not tell the complete story.

BDSM identity is an emerging focus of study for BDSM/kink and other sexological researchers. The assertion that BDSM is an element of identity is not new, but the study of identity salience (e.g., Rubinsky, 2021), identity sentiment (e.g., Hughes & Hammack, 2019), and identity development (e.g., Sprott & Hadcock, 2018) as they relate to BDSM is. To assess identity, researchers currently rely on self-selection, self-report, and measures created specifically for their studies, as there is not yet any psychometrically reliable and validated measure to assess BDSM identity (Vilkin & Sprott, 2021). Unless researchers are thorough or provide operational definitions, this means that individuals with a variety of approaches to BDSM – including those who do and do not identify with it – will self-select into BDSM/kink-specific studies, potentially resulting in data that conflates these groups.

BDSM orientation could sometimes, potentially, refer to research on BDSM fantasy and erotica. It is more likely, however, that when researchers are referring to BDSM/kink-oriented individuals, there is a degree of conflation between behavior, orientation, and identity<sup>5</sup> (van Anders, 2015). Researchers frequently conflated these three dimensions, both by using “oriented” without any operational definition of the term, and by using the language of all three dimension interchangeably throughout their studies (e.g., Waldura et al., 2016). When behavior, orientation, and identity are conflated, it lumps all those who identify with BDSM as part of who they are, how they form relationships, and how they explore and express themselves in with those who engage with BDSM as a pleasurable or skills-based behavior but not necessarily to the point of identity integration and community involvement.

Research into other sexual minority communities provides evidence that identity development and community engagement play key roles in how a person makes important decisions related to their sexuality – decisions like mate selection, expression of sexuality, and disclosure or concealment of their sexuality to others. Researchers are also learning that, in these ways<sup>6</sup>, BDSM is not different from other sexuality minority communities. Making a distinction between those who “do” and those who “are” is likely to provide more robust and generalizable interpretations of the research into the BDSM/kink community. For example, when researchers ask questions about disclosure of BDSM identity but fail to distinguish those who “do” from those who “are,” interpretation of the results of their research is limited. Coming out decisions

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<sup>5</sup> Per van Anders (2015), this use of orientation as a label encompassing all three terms is common in discussions of all types of sexuality.

<sup>6</sup> This does not mean BDSM/kink is not different from other sexuality minority identities in other ways. Concerns and issues facing LGBTQ+, trans\*, intersex, and other sexuality minority communities have some overlap in their experiences, but also are unique from each other in important ways that I do not wish to undermine, but which are outside the scope of this discussion.

for someone who “does” BDSM may be based on considerations of such things as finding other kinksters, issues of safety, and/or issues of privacy. Coming out decisions for someone who “is” kinky may be based on considerations of such things as how to live life authentically, how to find compatible relationships, and/or how to locate and engagement with community. Knowing which participants fall into which group changes the ways the data can be interpreted and applied both clinically and socially.

Those researchers who did make distinctions between the dimensions of behavior, orientation, and identity, or who focused on one of the dimensions with intention, were able to demonstrate significant findings about the nature of each one in myriad BDSM contexts. Researchers focused on<sup>7</sup> behavior were able to report on prevalence of those who engage in various behaviors (Holvoet et al., 2017), benefits of various behaviors to those who do them, and approaches to various behaviors from standpoints such as consent (e.g. Fanghanel, 2020), spirituality (e.g., Fennell, 2018), intimacy building (e.g, Jolene Sloan, 2015), and sexual pleasure (e.g., Simula, 2019). Researchers who focused on (see Footnote 6) orientation were able to report on the nature of BDSM fantasy and those who fantasize about it (e.g., Holvoet et al., 2017), the appeal of BDSM-specific erotica (e.g., Mondin, 2017), the role of fantasy and the erotic in approach to BDSM (e.g., Turley et al., 2018), and the use of BDSM as a tool for exploring many facets of oneself including gender (e.g., Bauer, 2018), sexual orientation (e.g., Sprott & Hadcock, 2018), and other identity components (e.g., Jolene Sloan, 2015). Researchers focused on (see Footnote 6) identity were able to report on individuals’ journeys into BDSM, history with BDSM/kink, the role BDSM plays in their relationships and lives more broadly (e.g., Sprott &

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<sup>7</sup> “Focused on” does not mean that conflating language wasn’t used – there were almost no studies present where the language was able to be coded solely to one dimension.

Hadcock, 2018), their engagement with the larger BDSM community (e.g., Zambelli, 2017), meaning making (e.g., Baker, 2018; Hughes & Hammack, 2019), and the intersections between BDSM identity and other important identity elements (e.g., Erickson et al., 2021).

Within-group research is not the only important reason to make distinctions between the dimensions of behavior, orientation, and identity. Making these distinctions also allows researchers to compare these groups to each other, and to investigate the ways community-wide phenomena may impact individuals differently based on their differing approaches to BDSM via these dimensions. For example, ten Brink and colleagues (2021) were able to demonstrate that private practitioners (those who practiced at home but not ever in community settings) were less likely than community practitioners (those who practice in community settings) to identify with a specific BDSM role identity and less likely to report identifying with BDSM/kink at all. This establishes that there are differences between those who practice for the sake of behavior and those whose practice plays some larger role in their BDSM identity; this difference deserves to be explored by further researchers.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Arguably the most notable limitation of this scoping review is that I conducted it alone. Systematic literature reviews of all types benefit from a collaborative, multi-researcher approach. Additional researchers can review a higher volume of material, collaborate on coding methodology, and establish inter-rater reliability when reviewing and coding the material in ways that are more rigorous than what is possible for a single reviewer. Future literature reviews on these topics would likely benefit from a collaboration between multiple researchers.

Another potential limitation was my decision to limit my review to work that was post DSM-5 (APA, 2013). It is important to separate work that pathologizes BDSM and/or

contributes to stigma about it, from work that does not. Choosing to limit the review to work that fell under the purview of the latest edition of the DSM (APA, 2013) meant greatly increasing the ratio of articles that operated on the premise that BDSM is not inherently disordered or pathological. However, especially in the time between the DSM-IV-R (APA, 2000) and the DSM-5 (APA, 2013), there was a notable and important push by researchers to build a body of research legitimizing BDSM/kink; research that paved the way for the revision that exists in the DSM-5. That research is not included in this scoping review and future literature reviews on these topics would likely benefit from its inclusion.

### **Conclusion**

When it comes to understanding the nature of human sexuality and intimate relationships, these questions about identity, orientation, and the role of behavior are important and complex. Researchers clearly have a long road ahead of them as they work to tease these concepts apart while continuing to consider the inseparable ways they inform and relate to each other. It is clear from the community and the existing literature that, regarding BDSM/kink, behavior, orientation, and identity are distinct dimensions of one's potential approach to/involvement with BDSM. Researchers should continue to be aware of these distinctions and make them whenever possible and appropriate.

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