

# Directness of Communication Mediates Sexual Satisfaction: What We Can Learn from a Positive View of BDSM Practice

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*BDSM practitioners typically report higher sexual satisfaction than the general population (Botta et al., 2019; Joyal & Carpentier, 2017; Strizzi et al., 2022). One possible reason for this is that the BDSM community prioritizes open communication and challenges traditional sexual scripts. In a sample of 376 individuals, we found a positive association between BDSM participation and sexual satisfaction which was fully mediated by direct communication about sex. These results build upon previous literature that emphasizes the vital role of communication in sexual satisfaction, broadening this result to a more sexually diverse population. In addition, the frameworks used by BDSM communities could inspire the use of similar strategies to improve communication and sexual satisfaction in non-BDSM populations.*

**Keywords:** *BDSM, Communication, Kink, Positive Sexuality, Sexual Satisfaction*

## Introduction

Men and women of all ages (even those not sexually active) agree that sex is important: sexual satisfaction contributes to overall well-being, quality of life (Flynn et al., 2016; Sánchez-Fuentes et al., 2014) and mental and physical health (Dundon & Rellini, 2010). It is associated with lower rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide risk, as well as increased life expectancy (Brody, 2010; Ibrahim et al., 2023; Scott et al., 2012). Sexual satisfaction overlaps with intimacy and relationship satisfaction while decreasing familial, financial, and work-related stress (Sánchez-Fuentes et al., 2014). Sexual dissatisfaction is a common reason for seeking relationship therapy (Duncan et al., 2020). Low self-esteem due to sexual dissatisfaction (Sánchez-Fuentes et al., 2014) increases the likelihood of alcohol and drug use or disordered eating (Arsandaux et al., 2020), while individuals who experience a decline in sexual excitement may seek novel sexual experiences outside of their relationships (de Oliveira et al., 2021). Infidelity is the leading cause of separation and divorce (Lehmiller, 2019) and profoundly impacts individual and relational well-being (Morgan et al., 2018). Traditionally, diverse sexual practices were stigmatized by society

and pathologized by researchers, medical professionals, and counsellors (Mulé, 2018; Wright, 2010, 2014). However, a healthy psychological attitude towards sex and sexual health is essential for growth and development (Mosher, 2017), and there may be much to learn from BDSM practitioners. Individuals who participate in BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Domination, and Submission, Sadism-Masochism) or identify as having a BDSM orientation appear to be more sexually satisfied than the general population (Botta et al., 2019; Joyal & Carpentier, 2017; Strizzi et al., 2022). Previous attempts to understand the mechanism of this relationship have focused on the BDSM role an individual adopts (Botta et al., 2019; Joyal & Carpentier, 2017) yet failure to find conclusive evidence may suggest another mechanism can offer a more feasible explanation. The directness of communication about sex employed by the BDSM community may explain this relationship more consistently. Boundaries of play and consent are continually negotiated through clear and consistent communication (Rubinsky & Roldán, 2021). In the BDSM community, challenging traditional sexual scripts, peer-facilitated education, and everyday safety and communication frameworks aim to increase pleasure and prevent non-consensual physical or psychological harm (Rittenhour & Sauder, 2023). These facilitators of communication could have broader applications in improving relationships for all. Sexual communication is critical for sexual satisfaction (Mallory et al., 2019; Mallory, 2022), and many psychological interventions to improve sexual satisfaction include communication skills training (Xu et al., 2022). Research is required to understand if communication

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is the reason for greater satisfaction in BDSM practitioners. The current study examines whether communication mediates sexual satisfaction and how lessons from this marginalized group can be applied more broadly outside BDSM practice.

### *Communication and Sexual Satisfaction*

Communication is vital for sexual satisfaction, yet candid communication about desire is rare, with individuals expressing fear of partner rejection, vulnerability, embarrassment, and shame around self-disclosure (Rubinsky & Roldán, 2021), especially in the infancy of a relationship (Montesi et al., 2011). However, even in long-term relationships, only two-thirds of individuals know what their partners find sexually satisfying (Byers, 2011). Resistance to disclosing sexual desires is complicated further if the sexual preference is stigmatized, with a heightened perceived risk of ostracism from their social network (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). Individuals are likely to weigh the risks and benefits of disclosure before revealing their sexual preferences (Brown & Weigel, 2018). If these disclosures are then met with hostility and create conflict, the disclosure is unlikely to promote intimacy or an understanding of the sexual preferences needed to foster sexual satisfaction (Mallory, 2022). The broader systemic Sexual Scripts Theory (SST; Simon & Gagnon, 1986) considers how partner communication may be inhibited by the unconscious compliance and internalization of socio-cultural, interpersonal and intrapersonal traditional sexual scripts (TSS), such as beliefs that women are passive, innocent gatekeepers of sex and men are emotionally stoic and sexually assertive (Gauvin & Pukall, 2018; Machette & Montgomery-Vestecka, 2023). Disclosure fears associated with this compliance may result in avoiding conversations or using indirect communication methods, reducing sexual satisfaction (Theiss, 2011b; Theiss & Estlein, 2014). Direct sexual communication and self-disclosure act as positive mechanisms to rewrite internalized TSS (Masters et al., 2013) through negotiation and interactions (Simon & Gagnon, 2003).

### *BDSM and Communication*

The BDSM community has rejected, rewritten and reworked TSS through extensive negotiation. Frameworks such as the 4Cs (Communication, Consent, Caring, Caution; Williams et al., 2014), Risk Aware Consensual Kink (RACK; Kaak, n.d.), and Safe, Sane and Consensual (SSC; Langdridge & Barker, 2013) underpin this cultural norm and provide guidelines for BDSM activities. Communication patterns are tied to community norms that encourage extensive sexual negotiations before, during and after sexual activity (Faccio et al., 2014; Gunning et al., 2023., Rubinsky, 2018) to minimize risk and maximize enjoyment at every stage of sexual activity. Simply having an awareness and understanding of alternative scripts increases the practitioner's autonomy and motivation to diverge from them (Rittenhour & Sauder, 2023). The "Kink" (another term used to describe BDSM) script centralizes explicit expression of sexual desire in all genders, encouraging female sexual assertion and pursuit of sexual desire (Rittenhour & Sauder, 2023). Power imbalances and the infliction of pain in this community are anticipated and conscious, consensual decisions. While play carries some physical and psychological risks, members of the BDSM community seek to be risk-aware, informed, prepared and willing (Langdridge & Barker, 2013). The BDSM community applauds affirmative consent, in contrast to the traditional script, where consent is assumed with an absence of "no" (Barker, 2013). Members distinguish between harm and injury, taking extra precautions to reduce extensive injury, maintain consent and provide adequate aftercare (Newmahr, 2011). During negotiations, especially before a "scene", individuals will set limits, discuss safe words that result in the immediate ending of an activity, and share sexual desires (Rittenhour & Sauder, 2023). Given the cultural norms within the BDSM community around sexual communication, negotiation and consent, this population is expected to communicate more di-

rectly about sex than the general population. This study aims to investigate the following research question:

Does the directness of communication around sex mediate the relationship between BDSM participation and sexual satisfaction?

## **Method**

### *Participants and Procedure*

Participants were over eighteen, spoke English and required access to the internet. Participants were required to be sexually active with at least one partner. In order to recognize that BDSM can transcend traditional sexual scripts (Faccio et al., 2014), that practitioners may practice ethical non-monogamy (ENM), and to be inclusive to LGBTQ+, any activity an individual experiences as sexually satisfying was considered suitable. Suggested sample sizes when conducting mediation analysis vary, with Fritz and MacKinnon (2007) suggesting requirements from around 400 to over 20,000. Due to the difficulties in recruiting this hard-to-reach population and the limitations of time and funding for the project, a sample size of 400 participants was targeted. The final participant pool included 376 participants, of which 100 (26.6%) participants did not practice BDSM, and 276 did practice BDSM (73.4%). The sample identified primarily as female ( $n = 236$ , 62.8%), with 114 identifying as male (30.3%) and 26 (6.9%) gender minorities who, for reasons of anonymity, have been grouped as "gender diverse". The mean age of the total sample was 41 years (ranging from 20-73,  $SD = 10.8$ ). Most participants resided in the United Kingdom (68.6%) and the United States (19.7%), were employed (66.8%) or self-employed (15.2%) and were educated to at least a lower University level (71%). Just under half of the participants identified as heterosexual (44.9%), with bisexuality (19.1%), pansexuality (11.2%), heteroflexibility (8%), queer (2.9%) and the remaining participants (13%) grouped as alternative diverse sexual orientations. Relationship status was varied, with 100 (26.6%) participants being married, 97 (25.9%) in a relationship, 43 (11.5%) in a casual sexual relationship, and 118 (32.3%) practicing consensual nonmonogamy either as polyamorous (19.2%), in an open relationship (9.3%), or as a relationship anarchist (3.6%). Of those participants who practiced BDSM, 134 (48.5%) were also ENM, compared to 2 participants (2%) who did not practice BDSM. Recruitment occurred via online social media platforms and community groups, as well as paper advertisements in BDSM community play spaces and at BDSM events, with the permission of hosts and event organizers. Snowball sampling was used: participants were encouraged to share the study with friends both within and outside the BDSM community. Data collection took place between May and June 2023. Before completing the survey, participants were informed that participation was voluntary and anonymous and required to provide informed consent.

### **Measures**

Demographic questions collected information on age, gender, country of residence, nationality, employment status, level of educational attainment, relationship status and sexual orientation. Free-text responses were often used instead of pre-defined options to allow more freedom and inclusivity in responses.

*The Indirectness of Communication about Sex Scale (Theiss, 2011a).* The 5-item scale utilizes a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). Questions include "I have never openly discussed my sexual desires with my spouse" and "I have directly talked to my spouse about appropriate sexual behaviors". For this study, the term "spouse" was changed to "partner". Theiss (2011a) provides a Cronbach's alpha for the full scale of 0.8. Cronbach's alpha for the research sample was consistent at 0.82. Individuals with multiple partners were asked to consider one of their partners who meets the eligibility criteria.

*Sexual Satisfaction Scale* (Theiss, 2011c). This 6-item scale utilizes a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree). Questions include "My partner and I have a fulfilling sexual relationship" and "There are parts of our sexual relationship that need improvement". Theiss (2011c) gives a Cronbach's alpha for the full scale of 0.85. Given the nature of sexual interaction for some BDSM participants, where orgasm is not always a central focus of sexual satisfaction (Simula, 2019a), one question ("My partner always makes sure I achieve orgasm") was removed. An updated Cronbach's alpha for the 5-item version was 0.86.

*BDSM Participation Questionnaire.* These questions were designed by the primary researcher to measure the participants' frequency of participation in BDSM, how often BDSM features in their sexual practices, the role they generally identify with, and their favorite BDSM practice. Response options for levels of BDSM participation were adapted from those used on Fetlife.com, a BDSM-friendly community of over one million practitioners who have self-defined profile options providing a more inclusive approach to understanding BDSM participation. These options included "I live the lifestyle when I can", "I live the lifestyle 24/7" and three further options. Two additional levels were added to classify non-BDSM participants ("I do not participate in BDSM" and "I do not participate in BDSM but I am curious to try it"). Further questions were asked regarding favorite BDSM practices, preferred BDSM roles, and how often BDSM was featured as part of their sexual practices to gauge a broader sense of the sample population and for exploratory analysis. If participants did not participate in BDSM, further participation questions were skipped.

## Results

Data from Qualtrics were exported to IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28). Incomplete questionnaires were understood as withdrawal from participation and were not included in the analysis. There were no missing data for the variables needed for mediation analysis. Heteroskedasticity (Breusch-Pagan test,  $p < .05$ ) and outliers in the data meant the data failed to meet the assumptions required for a standard regression, so heteroskedasticity-consistent standard error estimators (HC3) and bootstrapping using Hayes' (2022) PROCESS was used.

### Hypothesis Testing

To explore whether indirectness of communication mediates the relationship between BDSM participation and sexual satisfaction, the 4-step Baron and Kenny (1986) method was followed to conduct a simple mediation analysis using the PROCESS macro developed for SPSS by Hayes (2022). Using 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals, we found evidence of a total effect of BDSM participation on Sexual Satisfaction (unstandardized  $B = 0.151$ ,  $SE = 0.026$ ,  $CI = 0.101-0.201$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), whereby individuals who participate more frequently in BDSM report higher levels of sexual satisfaction. There was also evidence of an indirect effect of BDSM participation on sexual satisfaction through indirectness of communication (unstandardized  $B = 0.134$ ,  $SE = 0.019$ ,  $CI = 0.098 - 0.171$ ). When controlling for the indirect effect, the direct effect of BDSM participation on sexual satisfaction became nonsignificant (unstandardized  $B = 0.018$ ,  $SE = 0.025$ ,  $CI = -0.032 - 0.067$ ,  $p = 0.484$ ), evidencing a complete mediation. Indirectness of communication fully mediates the relationship between participation in BDSM and sexual satisfaction. BDSM participants appear to be more sexually satisfied because they seem to communicate more directly about sex than those who do not participate in BDSM.

### Exploratory Analysis

To test the robustness of the mediation, the analysis was rerun with each of the demographic variables added to the model. All were nonsignificant covariates across the whole mediation model; age

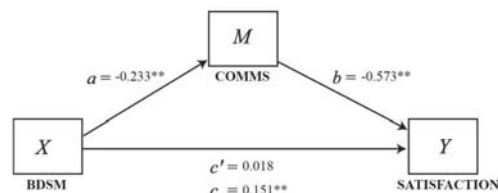


FIGURE 1. Simple mediation model depicting the total ( $c$ ), direct ( $c'$ ) and indirect effects ( $ab$ ) of BDSM participation on sexual satisfaction. \*\*  $p < .001$

( $p = 0.929$ ), gender ( $p = 0.511$ ), relationship status ( $p = 0.391$ ) and educational level ( $p = 0.053$ ).

Previous literature (Botta et al., 2019; Joyal & Carpentier, 2017) tested BDSM role as a mechanism underlying the relationship between BDSM participation and sexual satisfaction but the findings are contradictory. Thus, we tested this relationship with our sample as an exploratory analysis. The data failed to meet the assumptions required for a one-way ANOVA, so Kruskal-Wallis tests were used to compare medians between submissive ( $n = 124$ ), dominant ( $n = 72$ ) and switch ( $n = 80$ ) groups. Median distributions of sexual satisfaction scores were not significantly different ( $n = 276$ ,  $p = 0.279$ ) between BDSM roles.

## Discussion

The current study examined the mediating role of the directness of communication in the relationship between BDSM participation and sexual satisfaction. Consistent with the study's hypothesis, BDSM participants reported higher levels of directness of communication about sex, which increased reported levels of sexual satisfaction. However, when controlling for the mediator, the direct effect of BDSM participation on sexual satisfaction disappeared, demonstrating that the directness of communication completely mediates the positive relationship between BDSM participation and sexual satisfaction. Up until now, evidence has suggested that the BDSM population are reportedly more sexually satisfied (Botta et al., 2019; Joyal & Carpentier, 2017; Strizzi et al., 2022), yet the role of communication in that relationship was unexamined. This research bridges that gap in the literature. In line with previous research highlighting the positive impact of direct communication about sex on sexual satisfaction (Mallory et al., 2019; Mallory, 2022) and the theoretical underpinnings of

BDSM practice on direct communication (Gunning et al., 2023; Rittenhour & Sauder, 2023), it was not surprising to find this result. This study confirms that direct communication about sex is crucial in understanding the relationship between BDSM participation and sexual satisfaction, expanding the existing literature from non-BDSM participant samples (Mallory, 2022) to a more diverse sexual community. Additionally, BDSM participants were shown to communicate more directly about sex than the non-BDSM participants, which may have implications for the general population, and applications to healthcare settings, therapeutic practice, and broader social systems.

The BDSM community, as depicted in the literature, actively deviates from traditional sexual scripts, rewriting their own "kink" scripts through extensive interaction and communication (Gunning et al., 2023), taking control of their sexuality and owning it. All relationships may benefit from the lessons outlined by the BDSM community to increase awareness of these unconscious societal scripts and in doing so provide agency in their sexual experiences and relationships, feeling empowered by scripts that align with their values and desires. Researchers studying communication and sexuality can increase knowledge of alternative scripts outside of TSS in the general population by presenting guiding information about positive sexuality, relationships and communication skills training programs. In this way, knowledge sharing may help shift societal norms, leading to more inclusive attitudes and policies



regarding sexuality.

An alternative, indirect explanation for the increased levels of direct communication displayed by BDSM practitioners may be due to community affiliation and partner responsiveness. Direct conversations in intimate settings are shrouded with fears of partner rejection, vulnerability, shame and judgment around sexual self-disclosure (Rubinsky & Roldán, 2021). The BDSM community provides an accepting space for emotional security, belonging, validation and education (Graham et al., 2016), which may ameliorate fears around direct sexual communication, spotlighting the importance of social support, partner/community responsiveness, acceptance and guidance. If the environment or listener were unresponsive to disclosures, hostile or created conflict, it is unlikely that the conversation will be conducive to increased sexual disclosures and sexual satisfaction (Brown & Weigel, 2018; Mallory, 2022; Tassone et al., 2023). The community also provides various educational opportunities for newcomers to learn about BDSM and the cultural framework (Graham et al., 2016), which may not be found in mainstream media and may indirectly increase their ability to communicate more directly about sex.

Those who participate in BDSM behaviors but are unaffiliated with a BDSM community do not appear to have the same level of communication practices (Rittenhour & Sauder, 2023). Practicing BDSM in isolation may lead to assumptive sexual practices and indirect communication due to disclosure fears and a lack of adequate education and exposure to community communication guidelines and frameworks. BDSM has appeared more in mainstream media since the release of the book "50 Shades of Grey" (James, 2012). The book and film adaptation misrepresented fundamental features of BDSM, including nonconsensual activities, barely any negotiation, and sexual coercion, depicted BDSM as a mental incapacity and reinforced TSS. Self-learning BDSM from mainstream media and popular culture, alongside unconscious compliance to TSS, can result in an increased risk of unwanted sex, sexual compliance and sexual violence, particularly for women (Rittenhour & Sauder, 2023). Given the potential risk of harm, there is a pressing need to support this population. Professionals should seek to expand the research on self-learning practitioners and help direct them to healthcare resources, educational frameworks and community support. People who do not participate in BDSM can benefit from the example shown by those communities to improve relationship communication and sexual satisfaction. Building support networks, creating safe spaces to disclose sexual preferences, using frameworks and guidelines to aid negotiation, and questioning TSS are all lessons that can be applied to positive sexuality outside of the BDSM community. These strategies could be helpful to therapists, practitioners and coaches working with clients who struggle to communicate directly about sex. Although not directly measured through questioning, recruitment of BDSM participants for the current study took place mainly through an online BDSM-friendly community (Fetlife) and community snowballing, and therefore it is likely that the majority of the BDSM sample in this study had some level of affiliation to a BDSM community. Historically, much BDSM research has been centered on individuals within BDSM communities either in the earlier "club scene" or the later "online community" such as Fetlife. Due to methodological challenges, finding individuals who have "self-taught" BDSM is challenging; however, future research would benefit from investigating this population to reduce the risk of harm, analyze their communication practices, gain a broader view of their experiences of sexual satisfaction, and understand the indirect benefit of community belonging on communication practices.

Despite the multiple strengths of this study, it is crucial to consider potential limitations. The results of this preliminary investigation are based on a relatively small sample of participants, especially to interpret a complete mediation instead of a partial mediation. Participants were primarily located in the United Kingdom or the United States. Individualistic cultures show stronger positive associations between sexual communication and sexual satisfaction (Mallory, 2022), highlighting a cultural difference in

practices that requires further investigation. Countries with significant gender inequality had a weaker association between the two variables (Mallory, 2022). Future research investigating cultural gender inequality and consensual gender inequality, such as that in 24/7 power dynamics in mixed-sex BDSM couples, could provide further insight into the relationship between sexual communication and sexual satisfaction. Another limitation is self-selection bias. People who volunteer for sexuality studies tend to differ from those who opt out of participation. They tend to be homogenous in race, and females tend to participate in sexuality studies more frequently, which is consistent with the sample of this study. Furthermore, respondents answered towards the extreme ends of the options available on the scales, leading to several outliers that may have represented valid responses. Participants may have felt inclined to report being more sexually satisfied and communicating more directly due to social desirability bias. Finally, the current study relied on participants' self-identification with BDSM rather than selecting from a list of behaviors. This self-identification may have led to individuals under-reporting engagement in BDSM if they do not recognize those behaviors as BDSM (due to mainstreaming or normalizing certain behaviors such as spanking), or do not wish to be affiliated with BDSM due to stigma. More inclusive scales and language are needed to fully represent the richness and diversity of sexual satisfaction and sexual variety in the BDSM population. Even the term BDSM is limited, only covering behaviors referring to bondage, dominance, submission, sadism, and masochism.

## Conclusion

The current study is the first to highlight the role of direct communication about sex in the relationship between BDSM participation and sexual satisfaction. The directness of communication about sex completely mediates the effect of BDSM participation on sexual satisfaction, highlighting the pivotal role of open dialogue around sex for sexual satisfaction. The direct and indirect benefits of BDSM participation can be applied to non-BDSM participants in ways that do not include taking up BDSM, such as building communication skills and the use of frameworks, raising critical awareness of traditional sexual scripts, and encouraging community engagement in networks that promote positive sexuality.

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## Appendices

### *Appendix A*

#### Indirectness of communication about sex scale (Theiss, 2011a)



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##### Indirectness of Communication About Sex Scale

###### Items

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- (1) I have never openly discussed my sexual desires with my spouse.
  - (2) I have never been direct with my spouse about sexual behaviors I find satisfying.
  - (3) I have directly talked to my spouse about appropriate sexual behaviors. (reverse coded)
  - (4) I have openly discussed my sexual desires with my spouse. (reverse coded)
  - (5) I can openly talk to my spouse about our sexual relationship. (reverse coded)
- 

**Note.** Participants recorded their agreement with a series of items on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree).

**Sexual Satisfaction Scale** (Theiss, 2011c)—Unedited version—For the purpose of my study, question 3 was removed and the word partner was used instead of spouse.



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##### Sexual Satisfaction Scale

###### Items

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- (1) My partner and I have a fulfilling sexual relationship.
  - (2) I find the sexual contact that I have with my partner to be satisfying.
  - (3) My partner always makes sure that I achieve orgasm.
  - (4) I am content with the sexual aspect of our relationship.
  - (5) There are parts of our sexual relationship that need improvement (reverse coded).
  - (6) I am generally dissatisfied with our sexual relationship (reverse coded).
- 

**Note.** Measure utilizes a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree).

## *Appendix B*

### **Demographic questions**

What is your age? (Numerical input)

What is your gender? Please state how you identify your gender below.

In which country do you currently reside?

What is your nationality?

What is your employment status?

1. Employed
2. Self-employed
3. Unemployed
4. Retired
5. Student
6. Other

What is your highest level of educational attainment? Measurement/ Coding system copied from Strizzi et al., (2022)

1. Primary school (6-8 years in school)
2. Lower secondary school (9-11 years at school)
3. High School/ Higher Secondary school/ college (U.K.)/sixth form (11-13 years at school)
4. College (U.S.)/ lower university level (Bachelor degree level or similar)
5. Higher University level (Master's, Doctorate, PhD or similar)

What is your current relationship status?

1. Casual sexual relationship
2. In a relationship
3. Engaged
4. Married
5. Polyamorous
6. Open relationship
7. Relationship anarchist

How long have you been in your current relationship?

1. Under 6 months
2. 6 -12 months
3. 1 – 3 years
4. 3-5 years
5. 5-10 years
6. 10+ years

What is your sexual orientation?



## *Appendix C*

### **BDSM Participation Questionnaire**

How often do you practice BDSM (Bondage—Discipline, Dominance—Submission, Sadism—Masochism) in your sexual relationship? (If you have multiple partners, please consider the partner that you most frequently engage in BDSM with, that you also have sex with).

1. I do not participate in BDSM in my current sexual relationship/s
2. I do not participate in BDSM, but I am curious to try it in my sexual relationship/s
3. I practice BDSM occasionally
4. I practice BDSM only in the bedroom
5. I live the lifestyle when I can
6. I live the lifestyle 24/7

I have sexual experiences in my sexual relationship without incorporating BDSM...

1. Never
2. Rarely
3. Sometimes
4. Often
5. Always

I would best describe my role within my BDSM practice in my sexual relationship as:

1. Dominant/Top
2. Submissive/Bottom
3. Switch

My favourite BDSM practice in my sexual relationship is:

1. Dominance/Submission
2. Sadism/Masochism
3. Bondage/Discipline